

**SELECTED TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN A HIGH SCHOOL PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of PLCs, a form of professional development, has been shown to be successful in improving student learning (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997; Hord, 2004; Toole & Louis, 2002). In addition, participating in a PLC allows individual teachers to carefully examine and reflect upon their current teaching practices and how those practices either achieve the goal of improved student learning or need to be improved (DuFour, 2004). This examination and reflection may affect an individual's sense of identity as a teacher.

The literature reviewed in this study falls into three main categories which are professional development, PLCs and teacher identity. The section on professional development defines it and looks at how effective traditional forms of professional development have been on improving student learning. The next section on PLCs explores what they have to offer to both teachers and students, discusses concerns with leadership and PLCs, and examines a few case studies of PLCs that have been successful. Literature concerning PLCs in high schools, barriers to their effectiveness and examples of successful PLCs is also reviewed in this section. Finally, the review looks at the concept of teacher identity and how it may be affected by collaboration, teacher interaction, feelings of efficacy and participating in a PLC.

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of PLCs in a high school setting and explore how teacher identity may be affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC. With the use of narrative inquiry as the methodology, three teachers' experiences as members of a sustained PLC at the high school level are presented. In addition, their feelings about the experience and how it has affected each one's sense of identity as a teacher, if at all, were explored. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following research

questions: (1) What are the experiences of the three individual teachers in the same interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting? (2) How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting affect, if at all, their core beliefs about teaching and being a teacher? (3) How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting inform their teaching so as to improve student learning? (4) How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting influence how they interact with their colleagues on a professional basis?

The data were collected by means of conducting semi-structured interviews and having the teachers respond to a writing prompt. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for common themes. The themes which arose in the narratives included teacher identity, positive and negative feelings associated with the PLC, learning achieved in the PLC, isolation versus collaboration, the effect of the PLC on teacher interaction, the effect of the PLC on student learning and the effect of the PLC on teacher identity. The findings identify an understanding of the experiences of the three individual teachers as members of the same interdisciplinary high school PLC. The implications for theory include the need for further study in the area of the effect of participating in a high school interdisciplinary PLC on teacher identity. The implications for practice revolve around the need for school divisions to prioritize the creation and sustainability of PLCs in their high schools and to allot professional development time for them. The implications for future research include the need to examine the negative aspects of PLCs including the administrator's responsibility to recognize the signs of jockeying for position and possible bullying among colleagues.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Teachers, administrators and school divisions have as their primary goal the improvement of student learning and are continually searching for different ways to accomplish this goal. School divisions have spent, and continue to spend, countless numbers of dollars on professional development opportunities for teachers in the hope that it will result in improved student learning outcomes (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). Unfortunately, professional development for teachers has not always been successful in improving student learning, for the most part, despite the importance attached to it (Gusky, 2002).

The establishment of PLCs, a form of professional development, has, however, been shown to be successful in improving student learning (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 2004; Toole & Louis, 2002). The PLC is made up of educators who work collaboratively to achieve the goal of improving student learning (Hord, 1997) and it can take many different forms. The PLC may consist of a single subject department in a school, an entire school staff, or teachers from different schools who are working collaboratively on improving student learning. The common thread that defines all forms of PLCs is the quality of sustainable improvement in student learning resulting from the efforts of the group members (DuFour, 2004).

One factor that may affect the sustainability of the PLC is leadership, both within the PLC itself from teacher leaders and from the administrators who are participants. DuFour (2002) maintains that a PLC will only be successful and sustainable if it is fully endorsed and supported by the school administrator. In addition, the school administrator must be clear about what a PLC is and what it is not (Cranston, 2009). For example, the PLC is an opportunity for collaboration

towards improved student learning outcomes; it is not a forum for complaining about poor student behavior.

Leadership within the PLC, however, does not need to come solely from the school administrator. Leadership in a PLC can be an ideal opportunity for a principal to share or distribute some of his or her leadership responsibilities with teachers who have specific talents and expertise that the principal may or may not have. The sustainability of meaningful collaboration among teachers will not be realized if the leadership models utilized delimit the opportunities for teachers to lead some of the development work (Bolem et al., 2005).

There also seems to be some resistance to establishing and maintaining PLCs at the high school level. One reason may be the tradition of isolated departments and classrooms as well as a top-down model of administration (Hargreaves, 2006). Although there are many barriers to the sustainability of PLCs at the high school level, there are several studies which have shown that it can be done (Scribner, Hager, & Warne, 2002; McIntosh & White, 2006; Rourke & Mero, 2008). Unfortunately, all of the cases which show positive results involve PLCs which are composed of teachers who teach the same subject matter. This type of grouping is difficult to achieve in Saskatchewan, where the majority of the high schools are too small to have large numbers of teachers in the same school teaching the same subject matter. In addition, several researchers maintained that interdisciplinary teams as the membership in a PLC will undermine its success and may even lead to fragmentation of the staff (Kruse & Louis, 1997; Visscher & Witziers, 2004). This can occur when teachers of different subjects try to put their own particular subject area's interests or needs before the interests or needs of the collective group.

Teachers may become participants in a PLC, but that does not indicate that they will be receptive to changing their teaching practices, even if it means that the goal of improving student

learning may be achieved. The influencing factor for some teachers and their willingness to change may be the number of years that they have been involved in the teaching profession (Hargreaves, 2004; Reio Jr., 2005). Those teachers with more teaching experience may be less likely to embrace change or take risks to implement change that may or may not achieve the intended goal of improving student learning.

Teachers who experience feelings of efficacy as a result of their participation in a PLC are likely to try and sustain the PLC (Hannikainen & van Oers, 1999). If teachers feel that they are doing something worthwhile in that it may be successful at improving student learning, they are not going to just let it fall out of practice. However, the teachers must be open to collaboration and change if the PLC is going to be successful. Participating in a PLC allows individual teachers to carefully examine and reflect upon their current teaching practices and how those practices either achieve the goal of improved student learning or need to be improved (DuFour, 2004). This exercise, however, may be difficult for some teachers as it involves an examination of their sense of identity as a teacher. This sense of identity involves their core beliefs about teaching that are continually forming and reforming as they are exposed to new experiences (Walkington, 2005). Walkington suggests an individual's identity as a teacher, being so personal and so closely connected to their teaching practices, may prohibit some teachers from embracing the process of collaborating with colleagues.

Although there is a great deal of literature concerning PLCs and their effectiveness at improving student learning, as well as the development of teacher identity, there appears to be a need for research involving the effect on high school teacher identity of participation in a PLC.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of PLCs in a high school setting and explore how teacher identity may be affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC. With the use of narrative inquiry, three teachers' experiences as members of a sustainable PLC at the high school level were examined. In addition, their feelings about the experience and how it has affected each one's sense of identity as a teacher were explored.

Research Questions

The key objective of this research was to examine a PLC in a high school setting and explore how teacher identity may be affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC. The study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of the three individual teachers in the same interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting?
2. How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting influence how they interact with their colleagues on a professional basis?
3. How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting inform their teaching so as to improve student learning?
4. How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting affect, if at all, their core beliefs about teaching and being a teacher?

Positionality

The study of the effect of participation in PLCs on teacher identity is something that I have been interested in since the beginning of my teaching career, even when I did not know

what a PLC was. That is to say that collaboration with a group of colleagues has always been something I have been drawn to and it has never failed to make me feel better equipped to do my job as a teacher. This is due, in a large part, to the situation surrounding the first ten years of my teaching career.

Although I had a variety of jobs as both a substitute and a temporary replacement teacher, my first full time permanent teaching contract was at an urban middle school whose clientele consisted of students who were struggling to be successful in the mainstream system. While some of the students attended the school due to academic challenges, the majority of the students had issues with behavior and/or social situations. As a result, each of the five classrooms in the building contained two teachers, one male and one female, as well as an educational assistant. In addition, the school of approximately 130 students retained a school chaplain/counselor, a home liaison worker, two administrators, and had access to a variety of other health services.

My tenure at the middle school lasted for ten years and during that time my placement was in a Grade 6/7 classroom. My educational training revolved around teaching high school English Language Arts and my previous experience had been predominately in middle class high school situations. Needless to say, I felt ill-equipped to teach a variety of elementary level subject matter to students with both academic and behavioral struggles. I should not have worried, however, as my initiation at the middle school included membership into my first PLC and that made all of the difference.

To say that on most days at the middle school, the staff was in “survival mode” would not be an exaggeration. Students came to school with a variety of problems at home including abuse, poverty, neglect, and addictions and, as a result, learning was not the top priority for a large percentage of the student population. Some of the students had difficulty trusting adults and

many, having not been treated with respect themselves, were not very respectful. Some students had considerable anger issues and others had been the perpetual “victim” at their home school or schools. It was not uncommon that I would get a student in Grade 6 who could only read at a Grade 1 or 2 level and who had math skills at a similar level. Many students had large gaps in their learning and several had been out of school for significant periods of time. This is just a snapshot of some of the challenges that were faced by the staff on a daily basis.

Having had experience solely at mainstream schools, I was also not used to the team teaching approach or the practice of the entire school staff working together as a cohesive unit. Teachers continuously worked together in a “PLC”, although it was informal and was not identified as such. Teachers at this particular school took it for granted that they would share strategies for teaching and helping students and, as a result, we were always learning from each other. The teachers genuinely had the best interests of the students as a priority and met frequently, on both a formal and informal basis, to collaborate on what would help the students the most.

I highly doubt that I would have lasted for ten years as a teacher in that alternative program had it not been for the “PLC” of which I was a part. Teachers met formally one a week, in addition to the weekly staff meeting, to discuss individual students, their current issues, and to collaborate on strategies to work with the students to ultimately help them. In addition to the formal weekly meetings, teachers met in the hallways, staff room and in each other’s classrooms to discuss strategies and ask for help. This, of course, was on top of the collaboration that occurred on a daily basis between the co-teachers in each classroom. I feel that I have benefitted greatly from the knowledge of my colleagues and I actually now prefer, as a result of my experience, to collaborate with my colleagues instead of working in isolation. Membership in the

“PLC” provided me with an opportunity to share my successes and struggles with my colleagues as well as develop relationships based on trust. In addition to helping me to know what to do in certain situations, the PLC also provided affirmation that I was doing a good job. The first ten years of my teaching career, as a member of a PLC, have, in a large part, formed my identity as a teacher including how I interact with my colleagues.

When I transferred to a mainstream high school four years ago, one of the things that I noticed immediately was the lack of collaboration between colleagues. I missed the sense that someone always “had my back” and that I was not alone. I do not mean to imply that my new staff was not helpful or welcoming; in fact I received several offers of help in the form of using other teachers’ materials to teach my units. The difference was the collaboration. Due to the constructs of the high school schedule and the departmentalization inherent in the high school system, collaboration was not pursued. I also got the sense that teachers did not frequently ask their colleagues for help for fear of being perceived as inadequate. Even though I was now a member of a high school subject area department, the meetings revolved around information collection instead of collaboration. I missed being a part of a group that all worked together for the benefit of the students. I missed being a part of a group that made a difference.

Within the last two years, a PLC has been formed at the high school where I currently teach. This PLC was initiated by the teachers, themselves, to address a need regarding student learning in the school. Although I was quite comfortable and excited at the prospect of once again collaborating with my colleagues, this was a new concept and process for many of the teachers at the school and was initially met with trepidation. During this same time period, I returned to university to pursue a master’s degree in educational administration. Through my studies I was able to recognize that the group I had been a part of at the middle school was a

professional learning community and that my new school was embarking upon the same process. I learned the benefits to both the students and the professional staff of participating in a PLC and this fueled my interest in studying the effect of PLCs on teacher identity.

Significance of the Study

There exists a large body of research pertaining to PLCs and their benefit to improved student learning (Louis & Marks, 1998; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2004; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). There is also research to suggest that in order for student learning to improve, teachers must question and reflect upon their current practices which may lead to abandoning those practices that do not support student learning (Spillane & Louis, 2002). This implies a change in teacher identity, a concept on which there is also a great deal of research. Furthermore, although there is evidence that teachers who were participants in PLCs gained confidence and enthusiasm and were more willing to take risks and try new things (Cordingly, Bell, Rundell & Evans, 2003), there appears to be a gap in the research literature pertaining to the effect of participation in a PLC on teacher identity. My study seeks to describe the effect PLCs have on an individual teacher's sense of identity and it includes the stories of three different teachers, their experiences with and feelings toward a specific PLC, and the changes, if any, to their sense of identity as a teacher.

As far back as the 1920's, Vygotsky put forth that for meaningful learning to occur, one must cooperate with peers and interact with them in an environment. This is what transpires in a PLC and it not only serves to improve students' learning, but the learning of the participants as well. As the participants in a PLC collaborate on different ways to improve student learning, they may reflect upon their own identity as a teacher and how they may need to change their teaching in order to facilitate that improvement. If teachers are more aware of the potential benefits of

PLCs to both improved student learning and their own sense of identity, they may be more willing to participate in them or even initiate them in their own schools. Individual narratives are very important in helping teachers transform the present and influence the future for both their students and themselves in an effort to make it richer than the past (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). Although this study mainly provides a glimpse through narratives into the professional lives of three different teachers who are members of the same PLC and the effects of that involvement, if any, on their sense of identity as a teacher, it may resonate with other teachers who find themselves in similar situations.

Definitions

The following definitions were used in this study to facilitate clear communication and understanding:

PLC: A PLC refers to any group of educators who seek and share learning and act on that learning on a continuing basis with the goal of enhancing their effectiveness as professionals for the benefit of the students (Hord, 1997).

Professional Development: Professional development refers to any processes or activities a teacher utilizes to improve their professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to influence student learning (Guskey, 2000).

Teacher Identity: Teacher identity refers to the core beliefs about teaching and being a teacher that are held by an individual and which are continuously being formed and reformed as a result of experience (Walkington, 2005).

Delimitations

This study focused on three high school teachers who were members of the same interdisciplinary PLC in a particular urban high school and the effect participating in the PLC had on each of their continuously developing senses of teacher identity. The three participants were chosen through purposeful sampling and the interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview questions. The data were collected between February, 2011 and June, 2011.

Limitations

There were both positive and negative outcomes to the fact that I already had a collegial relationship with the people I chose to interview. The participants may have felt comfortable with me and the professional relationship I have had with them and, as a result, they may have been more willing to disclose information. On the other hand, this pre-existing professional relationship may have proven a hindrance in obtaining honest and accurate information, as the participants may not have felt free to state their true feelings for fear of repercussions (Reinharz, 1992). In addition, this study was limited by the participants' willingness to discuss the stories related to their experiences in the PLC and their sense of identity as a teacher. It was also limited in the fact that their stories do not represent a universal truth, but instead truth as it was perceived by the person telling the story.

Assumptions

This study made the following assumptions:

1. PLCs improve student learning.
2. Participation, through collaboration with one's colleagues, in a PLC has an effect on teacher identity.

3. All teachers have a sense of identity.

Organization of the Thesis

The five chapters of this thesis are organized in the following way. Chapter 1 establishes the research problem and sets up the research questions. In addition, the positionality of the researcher is described and assumptions, limitations and delimitations are outlined. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature pertinent to the research study including the concept of PLCs as professional development, PLCs and their relationship to improved student learning, and the formation of teacher identity. Chapter 3 examines the research design as well as the methodology of narrative inquiry and how it will be used in this study. Chapter 4 contains a presentation and synthesis of the data that were collected including the individual narratives of the teachers who participated in the research study and their feelings concerning their own sense of identity as a teacher and how it has been affected, if at all, by participating in a PLC. Chapter 5 consists of the discussion and examination of the research findings relative to the research questions as well as the implications for further research on this topic.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the existing literature pertaining to the topics of professional development, PLCs and their effectiveness on student learning, PLCs in high schools, and teacher identity. The first section describes professional development as the broad umbrella under which the concept of PLCs lies. The effectiveness of different types of professional development for teachers is explored. The second section deals with the concept of PLCs including the theory behind them, the leadership required to sustain them, and their impact on both teacher and student learning. The third section takes a look at the prevalence of and barriers to establishing sustainable PLCs at the high school level which are directly linked to improved learning outcomes for students. Finally, the fourth section delves into the area of teacher identity and examines what processes, fears, and emotions are associated with the personal and professional evolution of a teacher, including his or her resistance to change. This resistance is analyzed in regards to the implementation of PLCs.

Professional Development

The ongoing development and improvement of one's skills and knowledge is a necessary component of any profession. Teacher professional development is an essential practice for educators to be trained in new teaching strategies and to become aware of new educational ideas and practices. There are a multitude of professional development opportunities that teachers take advantage of. The difficulty lies in determining which professional development situation will be

the one to improve student learning and just how much of an effect on student learning does teachers' professional development have.

The Concept of Professional Development

Professional development for teachers is one of the simplest ways to increase teacher learning on a large scale. "High-quality professional development is a central component in nearly every modern proposal for improving education" (Guskey, 2002, p.381). Given this, individual teachers may choose to further their knowledge of teaching by enrolling in a master's program, taking online classes, brushing up on current literature or attending a conference. One way to ensure that the teaching professionals in a school or in a division have had the same training on new initiatives is to have them participate in professional development sessions. Some may argue that if the professional development isn't closely connected to an area of interest for the individual teacher then it will not be effective. Teachers' professional learning will likely improve student learning when it is directly linked to teachers' knowledge of subject content, how students learn that content, and how teachers can meaningfully relay that content to their students (Cohen & Hill, 2000).

It is vital that teachers examine their current practices in the classroom and think about how they can make changes in order to improve their teaching in ways that will ultimately benefit students and their learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2003). Educational reform may not occur if teachers maintain the status quo in their classrooms and, therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers to make changes. This may require a great deal of learning, on the part of the individual teacher, as well as sufficient support and guidance (Borko, 2004). School administrators can provide support and guidance along with meaningful professional development opportunities for teachers.

Professional development for teachers can have different focal points. One type focuses on the teacher's specific subject area and increasing his or her knowledge about that particular subject area. In this case, teachers should have a strong and rich knowledge of the subject areas they teach in order to foster student conceptual understanding (Borko, 2004). This means that they should understand the intricacies of their subject area and keep current on new information, research, or developments in their particular area of study. If the teacher is not well-versed in what they are trying to teach, there is a good chance that the students' learning about that subject will be insufficient (Borko, 2004). To this end teachers may attend workshops, in-services, or seminars to increase their knowledge about the subjects that they teach.

Another type of professional development focuses on topics of pedagogical interest to teachers that are not directly related to curriculum and their specific subject area. There are numerous conferences and workshops which focus on classroom management, assessment practices, fostering students' self-esteem, working with students with special mental or physical needs, instructional practices, and the list goes on. What all of these professional development opportunities have in common is that they offer a great deal of information over a small period of time leading to the expectation that the teacher is to take what he or she has learned and put it into practice in the classroom. The quality of professional development is directly linked to the number of hours it requires and whether or not the professional development is sustained over time (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). The amount and frequency of demands that are placed on a teacher's time only allows for a small period of time for professional development. Unfortunately, research indicates that for teachers, just as with students, meaningful learning can be a slow and even an uncertain process (Borko, 2004). This leads to the

emerging questions regarding the effectiveness of current teachers' professional development initiatives.

The Effectiveness of Professional Development on Student Learning

There are a number of challenges to realizing the effectiveness of professional development on student learning. Some of these include teachers' motivation, the process teachers go through to change how they teach, cost, whether or not the professional development is sustained over time or is just a stand-alone event, and support from administration.

Despite the fact that professional development for teachers is seen as an integral part of educational reform, it has, for the most part, been highly unsuccessful in improving student learning (Guskey, 2002). Schools divisions have invested countless numbers of dollars into professional development opportunities for teachers in the hopes of improving student learning (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). Teachers' motivation for engaging in professional development as well as the process in which teachers typically change are two crucial factors that are typically not taken into consideration by researchers (Guskey, 2002). This is not to say that all teachers' professional development is a failure, but only that there are great improvements that need to be made in order for it to be more effective for student learning.

"Improving professional learning for educators is a crucial step in transforming schools and improving academic achievement" (Darling Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 3). This is not a new idea in the field of education. The issue surrounding it, however, is how to make teachers' professional development effective and beneficial to improved student learning.

The likelihood that a professional development opportunity is going to improve student learning is directly related to whether or not it forms a coherent part of a wider set of opportunities for teacher learning and development (Garet et al., 2001). The professional development cannot be a stand-alone opportunity that has no connection to the rest of the teacher's practice if it is going to positively affect student learning. In fact, research indicates that "sustained and intensive professional development is more likely to have an impact, as reported by teachers, than is shorter professional development" (Garet et al., 2001, p. 935). One of the barriers to providing this type of professional development opportunity, however, is cost. This may be one of the reasons why professional development opportunities for teachers can tend to be one-off presentations or standalone workshops which may not have a positive effect on improving student learning.

Another potential barrier to the effectiveness of professional development initiatives on student learning comes from the administrative leadership. It is vital that the leadership team in a school be supportive of the professional development needed to improve student learning or it will not be effective (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). This support may come in the form of allocating funds to finance the training, providing the time necessary to attend the training, and making the sustainability of the professional development initiatives a priority in the school.

There are several research studies which examine the effectiveness of professional development initiatives on improved student learning. One research study found that professional development which encourages collegial support and collaboration, is linked to teachers' past experiences, and is aligned with other improvement efforts in the school has been shown to support changes in teaching practices (Garet et al., 2001; Ingvarson et al., 2005). These changes in teaching practices may aid in improving student learning. This sends a message to senior

educational administration that this is the type of professional development in which teachers should be engaging.

Research conducted by Showers and Joyce (1996) around the concept of peer-coaching demonstrated similar findings. They stated that teachers who engaged in professional learning that involved sharing their teaching strategies, experiences, and who planned in collaboration with one another, applied this new learning to their professional practice more often than those teachers who continued to work in isolation. The main focus of peer-coaching is not to give advice or feedback to the teacher being coached; rather the focus is on professional collaboration among colleagues. According to Showers and Joyce, “teachers learn from one another from planning instruction, developing support materials, watching one another work with students, and thinking together about the impact of their behavior on their students’ learning” (p.15). This is very different from the traditional one-off professional development opportunities that continue to be offered to teachers.

A research study was undertaken by the National Staff Development Council in 2009 to examine the existing professional development opportunities available to teachers and to measure their effectiveness regarding improved student learning. The researchers found that “sustained and intensive professional development for teachers is related to student achievement gains” (Darling-Hammond et al., p.5). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2003) argued that effective professional development must

engage teachers in practical tasks and provide opportunities to observe, assess and reflect on the new practices, be participant driven and grounded in inquiry, reflection and experimentation, be collaborative and involve the sharing of knowledge, directly connect to the work of teachers and their students, be sustained, on-going and intensive, provide

support through modeling, coaching and the collective solving of problems, and be connected to other aspects of school change. (p. 2)

This describes an effective PLC which is ongoing, collaborative and is directly connected to improving student learning outcomes.

PLCs

Many school divisions are adopting the model of the PLC as a professional development tool for encouraging honest dialogue and creating a climate of collaboration among staff members. The notion of PLCs as drivers for positive school change has been explored by several contemporary educational thinkers. Sustained, substantial school improvement is most promising in a school with a nurturing culture of supporting staff to become a PLC (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 2004; Toole & Louis, 2002). Different people in the field of education, however, have varying ideas of what constitutes a PLC. DuFour (2004) illuminated this point when he stated:

People use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education – a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organization, and so on. (p.1)

Defining what does and does not constitute a PLC should not be the focus of the PLC. The value of the PLC is not determined by its definition but by the quality of sustainable improvement that results from the efforts of the group of people who are participating in it (DuFour, 2004). If the goal of the PLC is improved learning outcomes for students, then it should not matter which form it takes. How to achieve that goal should be all that matters. DuFour (2004), among others (Eaker & Keating, 2008; Sackney & Walker, 2001), has spent several years examining and

writing about the concept of the PLC and the positive effects that can be experienced by both teachers and students in a school that shifts its focus from teaching to learning. DuFour maintains that the colleagues who are members of a PLC must first ask themselves three questions if they want their PLC to accomplish its goals:

1. What do they want each student to learn?
2. How will they know when each student has learned it?
3. How will they respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? (p.1)

How these questions are answered, particularly the third one, will set the course for the work of the PLC.

There are several characteristics attributed to PLCs that successfully facilitate teacher learning. Some of the common characteristics put forth by educational researchers (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2008; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001; Little, 2003; Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) are that PLCs provide teachers with ongoing opportunities to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues, directly relate to teacher and student learning, are grounded in reflection of teachers' everyday practice, provide opportunities for collaboration among colleagues, are supported by strong leadership, and closely examine the relationship between teaching and learning. The point is consistently made that teacher learning is necessary for student learning to occur.

Concept of PLCs

As previously stated, different practitioners have varying ideas of what constitutes a PLC. Even on an individual elementary or high school staff, the members may differ in their views on this concept. Hord (1997) loosely defined PLCs as a group

in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit; thus, this arrangement may also be termed communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. (p.1)

The PLC must be connected to both teacher and student learning to be effective. According to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2003), "teachers need opportunities to share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts" (p.1). Sackney & Walker (2006) asserted that "teachers' knowledge base is expanded through discourse and reflection and not solely from mandated practices" (p.352). Whatever the view, the concept of the PLC comes from a firm theoretical background. The interpretation of the learning theory may fluctuate, but the learning theory itself remains constant.

Learning theory behind PLCs. The concept of the PLC can trace back some of its roots to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development as well as Lave and Wenger's (1991) work around situated learning and communities of practice. Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p.86). In addition, Vygotsky (1978) purported that true learning can only occur in situations where a person is interacting with others in his environment and cooperating with his peers. In the context of PLCs, this can be interpreted to mean that individual members of a PLC have the potential to learn more through collaboration with their peers than through independent learning.

Lave and Wenger (1991) put forth that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice in which the level of participation is legitimately peripheral in the beginning, but it slowly increases to more complete engagement. People, especially those in the field of education, continually find themselves in situations where learning can take place. Learning is not simply seen as an individual's acquisition of knowledge, but as a "process of social participation" in which "the nature of the situation impacts significantly on the process" (Smith, 2003, p.3). When a person becomes engaged in a PLC, according to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), he or she will experience an increase in both the quality and quantity of learning that takes place over time. Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice are made up of both newcomers and those who are established members of the group. They maintained that the purpose for newcomers is not to "learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 109). Individual members of the PLC will learn much more if they actually take part in the collective conversations. For all members of the community of practice, "learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part" (Smith, 2003, p.6). It is essential that these conversations take place if learning is going to occur. It is also essential that all members of the PLC participate in these discussions in order to drive the learning of all of the stakeholders. Mitchell & Sackney (2001) claimed that "just as students learn from and with one another, so too teachers construct their knowledge not only upon the exemplars that they discover in their own practice but also upon those that they cull from their colleagues' practices" (para.8). Teachers will make greater gains in their professional learning if they are willing to collaborate with and learn from their colleagues.

In addition, Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that not only are these communities of practice essential to learning, but that they must also be seen as valuable and worthwhile (Smith, 2003). When people feel that the work they are undertaking is of value, they are more apt to continue that work. Wenger and Snyder (2000) specified that when like-minded people come together to work on a shared passion or venture that they are entering into a community of practice. The shared passion or venture is learning, both for students and for educators, and this, in conjunction with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, is essentially the foundation of the PLC.

Leadership and PLCs. The implementation of a PLC in a school will only be effective if it receives the support and endorsement of the school administrator (DuFour, 2002). Even with the best intentions, without strong and involved leadership, the work of the PLC will fall by the wayside. This leadership can come from upper administration, school-based administrators, or even teacher leaders in the school. Not only does the PLC need to be supported, but it must also be seen as valuable by both the leaders and the other members of the PLC. According to Blasé and Blasé (1999), a principal who is an effective instructional leader is able to “develop a culture of collaboration, equality and the lifelong study of teaching and learning through talk, growth and reflection” (p.20). An appropriate construct for this collaboration, talk, growth and reflection is the PLC.

DuFour (2004) gave principals the following advice regarding PLCs: “To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results” (p.1). To follow that advice, however, one must understand what a PLC is all about. DuFour (2004) suggested that leaders of PLCs focus on three “big ideas” in order to be effective: ensuring that students learn, developing a culture of

collaboration, and focusing on results. These big ideas should lead to achieving the goal of the PLC which is to improve student learning. Creating a culture of collaboration may be difficult at first because it may be a completely foreign concept for those teachers who have taught their entire careers in isolation; but again, if the goal is student learning, then the members of the PLC should find a way to collaborate with their peers. DuFour (2004) also stated that “faculties must stop making excuses for failing to collaborate” and that “a group of staff members who are determined to work together will find a way” (p.5). A good leader, however, will overcome the potential obstacles and keep staff members focused on the goal of improving student learning.

An effective school leader who values the work of PLCs will encourage and support this collegial collaboration by making time for the members of the PLC to meet (Ingvarson et al, 2005). A group of teachers who meet regularly but continue to work in isolation may not hit the mark of improving student learning because they may not be willing to change what they are currently doing or how they are currently teaching in order to benefit the students. Toole and Louis (2002) contended that school staff relationships must encourage instructional collaboration while, at the same time, challenge and critique teachers’ fundamental beliefs about students, how they learn, and what part teachers should play in improving student learning.

Along with the collaborative focus on learning is a focus on results. “Educators who focus on results must stop limiting improvement goals to factors outside the classroom, such as student discipline and staff morale, and shift their attention to goals that focus on students learning” (DuFour, 2004, p.6). The PLC, if it is going to be effective, cannot simply be another forum for discussing poor student behavior and how to manage it. There is a need for that kind of discussion but it must not become the focus of the PLC if improved student learning and achievement is the goal. According to DuFour (2004), “when a school begins to function as a

professional learning community, . . . teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all and their lack of coordinated strategy to respond when students do not learn” (p. 2). PLCs can become powerful tools from which teachers can evaluate their current practices by focusing on student learning. To accomplish this, it is imperative that teachers work collaboratively through a process to “analyze and improve their classroom practice” (DuFour, 2004, p.3). This may lead to some anxiety on the part of individual teachers if they realize that their current practices are not effective when it comes to improving student learning outcomes. Later in this chapter, this difficulty will be elaborated upon and explored in the section on teacher identity.

Educational leadership and PLCs. One of the many priorities a principal in today’s ever-changing and complex world must have is a focus on improving student learning. DuFour (2002) believed that “a school cannot make the transition to the collaborative, results-oriented culture of a professional learning community without a principal who focuses on learning” (p.15). This may be difficult for a principal who feels that there is already too little time in the school day in which to get things accomplished. Even if it is difficult, though, it is vital that a principal serve as a leader for learning (Lashway, 2003). This role is essential for student learning to improve. Gone are the days where the principal only dealt with administrative and behavioural issues. Sackney and Walker (2006) submitted that principals must be enthusiastic learners themselves in order to lead PLCs. This may mean that a principal take part in the learning in a PLC or that the principal make time to ensure that the PLC and student learning are put at the top of his or her priority list. Cranston (2009) cautioned that all the work needed to implement and nurture a PLC will be for naught if the principal is not clear about what a school operating as a PLC looks like and what it requires to become one. According to Cranston, the school administrator must make

it a priority to become educated about the benefits and fundamental processes of the PLC. School leaders, whether they are aware of it or not, can make or break the success of a PLC in a school.

Cranston (2009) outlined the effect the school principal has on the development of a PLC.

A school developing a professional learning community is influenced by principal leadership. Since a great deal of legal responsibility, including that of teacher evaluation, can reside with the principal, principal leadership can be regarded as a critical force in a school's capacity to influence educational outcomes for all students. (p. 13)

The principal has a number of responsibilities pertaining to student learning including being well-versed in academic content, teaching and assessment strategies, as well as being aware of the gaps or deficits in the learning of the students in his or her school (Lashway, 2003). When principals begin to analyze these gaps and deficits in learning, they can begin to effect change through the creation of PLCs established to address learning issues. Some educators may believe that a true and effective PLC does not include an administrator and that the presence and leadership of an administrator will only serve as a barrier to honest and genuine discourse among colleagues. However, research indicates (Cranston, 2009) that not only do principals have a role to play in PLCs, but also that their role is essential to the effectiveness and survival of the PLC.

Leadership and school culture change connected with PLCs. The administrator responsible for the establishment of a PLC in a school must navigate the waters of change carefully. It is important for the principal to be mindful of the existing school culture when establishing a PLC, as that culture is the result of years of traditions and rituals that may be extremely meaningful to the potential participants (Sackney & Walker, 2006). "These cultural patterns have a powerful impact on performance, and shape the way staff think, act and feel"

(p.351). Spillane and Louis (2002) asserted that in order for student learning to improve, teachers must question and examine their current ways of doing things and that may require them to unlearn and abandon those engrained understandings of teaching and learning that are not supporting student learning. The principal must also keep in mind that for some teachers, working collaboratively may be what Heifetz and Linsky (2002) called an adaptive change which requires the individual to learn new ways of doing things. The potential danger is that “the deeper the change and the greater amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p.14). Hall and Hoord (2001) asserted that “an entire organization does not change until each member has changed” (p.23). If the principal is successful in developing relationships of trust with the staff members, the resistance will diminish and the PLC will thrive and be effective.

Distributed leadership. The concept of distributed leadership involves the principal utilizing the talents and expertise of various staff members to share the responsibility for different leadership tasks (Elmore, 2000). Once the PLC has been established, the principal continues to have a role in its maintenance and survival. It is the job of the principal to nurture that culture and to provide leadership and guidance for PLCs in his or her school. To achieve this outcome, the principal must be willing to focus on improving student learning and be confident enough to empower others in the PLC by practicing distributed leadership. This may involve sharing the responsibility and authority for guiding and directing instruction and learning about instruction with the ultimate goal being increased benefits for student learning (Elmore, 2000). The school principal does not necessarily have to be the leader of a PLC in his or her school. An effective principal is continually encouraging and fostering leadership growth in the other staff members and finding ways to utilize the talents of those individuals. In fact, a PLC is the ideal

forum for emerging leaders to test the waters of leadership and to make contributions to the group.

If we are serious about building professional learning communities within and between schools, then we need forms of leadership that support and nourish meaningful collaboration among teachers. This will not be achieved by clinging to models of leadership that, by default rather than design, delimit the possibilities for teachers to lead development work in schools. (Bolam et al, 2005, p.16-17)

Using the leadership talents of the teachers in the school in PLCs not only gives other individuals the opportunity to share and develop their leadership skills, but it also allows the school administrator to share some of the increasing responsibilities that seem to keep getting added to their job description. The school administrator will not have his or her power and authority diminished by sharing or distributing it; instead it will only grow stronger.

Measuring the effectiveness of PLCs. An effective PLC works to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the ultimate goal of improving student learning (Bolam et al., 2005). Once again, the common denominator of all effective PLCs is the focus on improved learning outcomes for students as the goal. In addition, research has shown that effective PLCs have a specific set of characteristics: shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration, and the promotion of group as well as individual learning (Stoll et al, 2006). Establishing a PLC in a school is only worthwhile if it is effective. Hord (2008) contended that “a true professional learning community is a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful collegial learning” and that “this learning is intentional for the purpose of improving staff effectiveness so that all students learn successfully to high standards” (p.13). The professional learning that occurs must be

purposeful and have improved student learning as its end result. In highly effective PLCs, teachers work together to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional practices on improving student learning outcomes (Kanold, Tonchef & Douglas, 2008). The only way to measure the effectiveness of the PLC is for the teachers involved in it to evaluate if the work done in the PLC has resulted in improving student learning.

The change in student learning as a result of effective PLCs does not happen overnight. Different schools will be at different stages in the development and implementation of their PLCs and so the measure of effectiveness cannot be the same for every school. For some schools, the effectiveness might be gauged by how many staff members are supporting and participating in the development of the PLC. For others it might be measured in the improvement in students' test results and the sustainability of the PLC over time. As long as the goal remains improved learning for both students and educators and there is continuous movement towards achieving that goal within the PLC, then the PLC is effective. However, to demonstrate results, "PLCs must be able to articulate their outcomes in terms of data that indicate changed teaching practices and improved student learning" (Vescio et al., 2007, p. 82). It takes time to measure and evaluate on top of the time already taken up by the work of the PLC. Schools and administrators must find the time and make this a priority if the PLC is going to have an impact on student learning.

The impact of PLCs on student learning through teacher learning. The application of PLCs in schools has had a positive impact on both teachers and students. Teachers who participate in PLCs gain confidence and enthusiasm, are more willing to try new things and believe that they were actually making a difference in student learning (Britt, Irwin, & Ritchie, 2001; Cordingley, Bell, Rundell & Evans, 2003). They also maintained that their students, as a

result, became more organized, more motivated to learn, demonstrated improvements by obtaining higher test results and were themselves using collaboration as a learning strategy. In reviewing several case studies involving the impact of PLCs on student learning, Vescio, Ross and Adams (2008) found that “an intense focus on student learning and achievement was the aspect of learning communities that impacted student learning” (p.88). A group of professionals all focused on improving student achievement and working collaboratively toward that end is bound to have a positive impact on student learning.

Several educational researchers have conducted studies related to the impact of PLCs on improved student learning. Louis and Marks (1998) concluded that schools with effective PLCs developed an authentic pedagogy which highlights making meaning through conversation, higher order thinking, and developing knowledge that is beneficial both inside and outside of the classroom. This is a very obvious advantage to students and their learning. Louis and Marks also contended that schools with an engaged PLC demonstrated higher levels of social support for achievement and higher levels of authentic pedagogy than schools without a PLC. Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins & Towner (2004) found that one particular group of teachers they were studying made significant gains in their PLC in that they developed a new approach to teaching language arts to a group of low achieving students which resulted in improved reading scores for the students. Strahan (2003) described how a PLC in an elementary school encouraged teachers to collaborate with a curriculum facilitator to change their teaching practices and once again, the result was significant improvement in achievement for students. Following a study regarding the use of PLCs in schools, Supovitz and Christman (2003) maintained that “there was evidence to suggest that those communities that did engage in structured, sustained, and supported instructional discussions and that investigated the relationships between instructional

practices and student work produce significant gains in student learning’’ (p.5). Nelson (2008) studied three secondary mathematics and science PLCs and submitted that sustained professional dialogue which takes an inquiry stance is what contributes to the kind of professional learning that has a direct impact on teachers’ practice in the classroom and, ultimately, on student learning. Several case studies regarding the impact of PLCs on improved student learning found a connection between membership in a PLC and a focus on changing teaching strategies and practices to align more closely with student needs. The PLC may have improving student learning as its main goal, but its members may also make the commitment to reflect upon their current classroom practices and be open to changing those practices in the interest of improved student learning.

PLCs in High Schools

Hargreaves (2006) put forth that secondary schools, or high schools, have typically been resistant to large scale reform in the past. Furthermore, he stated that the reasons for this resistance are directly linked to “an historical legacy of top-down administration and fragmented departmentalized subject-based communities” (Hargreaves, 2006, p.127). Many teachers have traditionally worked and continue to work within the isolation of their individual departments and classrooms. Elbousty and Bratt (2009), in their research regarding establishing PLCs in a high school setting, submitted that although teachers are aware that working in isolation instead of collaborating with colleagues on issues such as assessment and teaching practices is not an optimal method of improving student learning and achievement, they are encountering various challenges and forms of resistance when it comes time to make changes. There have been research studies, however, which provide evidence that reform in the form of the implementation of PLCs has been successful in several high school settings (Scribner, Hager, & Warne, 2002;

McIntosh & White, 2006; Rourke & Mero, 2008). Some of the obstacles to adopting PLCs in high schools and the ways to overcome them will be examined next.

Barriers to Establishing Effective PLCs in High Schools

There are many barriers to establishing and maintaining PLCs in high schools. These include time, the traditional model of teaching in isolation, leadership, the movement of teachers to different schools, the fear of losing autonomy, and groupthink. According to Servage (2008), “failure is the collective consequence of our individual weaknesses, our individual choices, our individual insecurities, our individual fear of change, and our individual quests for power” (p. 71). For the barriers to be overcome, each individual in a PLC could do his or her part to engage in honest dialogue and collaboration with the goal of the improving student learning always at the forefront.

One of the biggest perceived barriers to the implementation and use of PLCs in schools is time (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; DuFour, 2004). High school teachers are responsible for a large number of students in addition to the expectation that they also volunteer their unpaid time to support students’ extra-curricular activities. Although most high school teachers receive some percentage of their day as preparation time, it may become a logistical nightmare, in some buildings, to coordinate the prep time to accommodate a PLC. In an ideal situation, teachers with common subject areas of teaching would have their preparation time together so that they could work together as a PLC. The size of a high school staff, whether it is large or small, can impede the work of a PLC during the school day.

Teachers, especially high school teachers, are used to working in isolation and this can be a second barrier to establishing PLCs in high schools. Participating in a PLC may mean that instead of individually making decisions that will affect one’s teaching practices, consensus must

be reached. This can be a barrier to establishing an effective PLC in a high school because teachers are accustomed to highlighting their differences and uniqueness and admitting to a shared vision may just be too much of a compromise for some teachers (Elbousty & Bratt, 2009). The practice of teaching is a very personal activity for many teachers and it may be easier for teachers to continue keeping their door closed than to take the risk and open themselves up to collaborating with other colleagues and sharing how they do things. It is very difficult to realize and admit that what one has been doing in his or her classroom may not be working to improve student learning and needs to change.

Another barrier to establishing effective PLC in high schools is change in leadership. A particular administrator may be a driving force behind the PLC, but if that administrator is moved to a different school, the PLC may not survive. Some reasons for this may be that the incoming administrator has different ideas about what the focus of the professional learning in the school should be, the teaching staff had not fully bought into and become engaged in the process and were more than happy to let the PLC die, or simply that the incoming administrator did not want to continue on with anything that the former administrator had started. This is an opportunity for a teacher leader to assist the in-coming administrator with the transition to the existing PLC. Leadership is essential in establishing and maintaining an effective PLC, whether it comes from an administrator or a teacher, and that leadership must be consistent and maintained over time.

In addition to the retention of administrators as leaders of PLCs, the movement of teachers to different schools can also have a detrimental effect on the success of a PLC. Even if the PLC is working extremely well together, the loss of a few key people, especially those who have taken on leadership roles within the PLC, may determine its demise. A high school in west

Illinois was one of the first American high schools to embrace the establishment of PLCs and they have developed a way to alleviate some of the barriers that can come with teachers retiring or transferring to other schools (Honowar, 2008). To determine if the potential new teacher hire will be a good fit, not only to the school's academic and extra-curricular programs but also to the existing PLCs, the candidates meet with the PLC teams in addition to the administration and department heads (Honowar, 2008). This demonstrates, to both the potential new members as well as the existing members of the PLC, the value that the school and its administrators put on the established PLCs and their continued success.

Teachers and administrators may assume that working in a PLC means the end of teacher autonomy and individualism. This can be a barrier to the establishment of a PLC because teachers can be fiercely protective of their right to individualism. One example of a high school that overcame this barrier is Central High School in mid-western United States (Scribner, Hager, & Warne, 2002). The principal of Central fostered a strong and engaging PLC by allowing the teachers to maintain their professional autonomy while they shared a common identity around teaching and learning. Although they learned together and collaborated as a PLC, they were not mandated to change their teaching practices. Instead they were encouraged to take risks that would benefit student learning and to see their work through the eyes of their students. Scribner et al. go on to describe how the teachers were expected to strike a balance between the collaborative learning that occurred in the PLC and their own individual learning needs. However, it is equally important that teachers do not glorify individualism at the expense of authentic collaboration. Senge (1990) warned that "organizations break down, despite individual brilliance and innovative products, because they are unable to pull their diverse functions and talents into a productive whole" (p. 441). It is important that individual teachers are able to share

their expertise with others but also be willing to collaborate with their colleagues on best practices for improved student learning without the fear of losing their individuality. In order for a PLC to overcome this barrier and be sustainable, the participants must be able to find a balance between individualism and collective sharing toward a common goal.

Another barrier to maintaining an effective PLC can come from too much agreement and consensus building on the part of the teachers. Janis (1971) coined the term “groupthink” which explains this phenomenon. Janis (1971) explained that “groupthink” occurs when the group’s quest for consensus becomes more important than a realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action. There is a danger of “groupthink” occurring in a PLC. According to Janis (1971):

The more amiability and esprit de corps there is among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink. (p. 187)

Members of the PLC may not want to be too critical of the ideas of their colleagues, even if it means that the PLC will not be as effective. This may be a particular issue in high schools, where teachers have traditionally worked in separate smaller departments led by a department head and where things have customarily been done in a particular way. These participants have what Mitchell and Sackney (2001) called “strong ties” and, although they are necessary to provide support to the group members, it is those members with “weak ties”, those participants with opposing viewpoints, who provide the greater learning opportunities within the PLC. Participants in a PLC must be aware of the potential dangers of “groupthink” and make a conscious effort to avoid it during the process of collaboration in order for the PLC to have the greatest benefit to both improved student and teacher learning. The conflict that may arise within the PLC as a

result, should not be avoided but rather seen as a challenge, that when overcome, will lead to the most profound learning (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001).

Some teachers simply prefer to work in isolation. They may not feel the need to share their ideas and teaching practices with others or they may not want to be seen as inadequate or unskilled as a teacher in front of others. Most high school teachers do not have very much experience being a part of professional conversations that are public and may be critical of their own and their colleagues work (Wilson & Berne, 1999). Some teachers simply lack the confidence to open up their teaching practices and put them on display for their colleagues and they are legitimately afraid of the criticism that may follow. Some teachers see the collaboration process of the PLC as an unfair practice in that a couple of people may end up doing the work for the group instead of the work being shared equally (Elbousty & Bratt, 2009). Others would just prefer to do the work themselves as they see that as a more efficient use of their time or they see their ideas and practices as not needing any change. Some teachers would prefer to work with only one or two other colleagues whose teaching practices and educational philosophy is very similar to their own (Elbousty & Bratt, 2009). These types of attitudes are challenges to the PLC and those teachers who would prefer to only work with like-minded colleagues defeat the purpose of the diversity of discussion and collaboration of the PLC and its primary goal to work together to improve student learning outcomes (Elbousty & Bratt, 2009). It is important then that something is done to encourage high school teachers to participate in collaborative PLCs.

Establishing Effective PLCs in High Schools

As previously mentioned, there have been studies that provide evidence supporting the success of PLCs in a high school setting. It is just a myth that high schools are unable to lead a comprehensive change effort in the school and that they are complex, loosely-joined systems

(Hord, 1984). The structure of the high school, with its different instructional departments, makes it an ideal setting for collaboration between staff teaching in similar content areas. It is important, however, that each PLC tailor its focus to the needs of the school and not simply attempt to replicate a successful PLC that they have observed in another school (Honawar, 2008).

Rourke & Mero (2008) documented evidence of the successful establishment of a PLC at the high school level. The teaching staff at Wheaton High School participated in subject specific PLCs at which they focused on collaboration regarding teaching and assessment strategies and practices (Rourke & Mero, 2008). Working with colleagues who taught similar subject areas was the common thread which led to willing participation in the PLC.

McIntosh & White (2006) provided evidence of another successful high school that has implemented PLCs. A large, comprehensive high school in Findlay, Ohio established PLCs based on common grade-level teachers in an attempt to increase the percentage of successful freshman students at the school. Time was given to teachers to meet to both reflect upon and engage in dialogue regarding the use of best practices in the classroom. In addition to time, training around collaboration was provided to the teachers. The results demonstrated that there was increased academic performance, fewer freshman students failing classes, increased attendance and reduced expulsions for freshman students.

Loris High School in South Carolina provides yet another example of successful and effective PLCs at the high school level. Rourke and Hartzman's (2009) examination revealed a school which had the goal of improving student literacy rates at the heart of their PLC. They also spent time dialoguing around effective teaching methods and setting high expectations for the students.

Much of the evidence of the successful implementation of sustained PLCs at the high school level has one thing in common: they all revolve around common content areas of teaching, or subject departments. Visscher and Witziers (2004) argued that teacher collaboration focused on interdisciplinary teams will not be successful and will only lead to fragmentation of the staff involved in the PLC. The differences between teachers' power and status with departments in addition to the differences in their ideas regarding the subject matter that the interdisciplinary PLC is dealing with may serve to impede the development of the PLC (Visscher & Witziers, 2004). Kruse and Louis (1997) maintained that an interdisciplinary team as the basis of a PLC will only serve to undermine its abilities to deal with whole school issues and will be ineffective at reaching any sort of compromise. Kruse and Louis (1997) also found that interdisciplinary teacher teams may minimize the opportunities teachers have for both self-reflection and collaborative discussion regarding teaching practices. These studies indicate that PLCs have a better chance of being effective at the high school level if they are composed of participants who teach the same subject matter.

Teacher Identity

Each teacher has, and is in the process of creating, a professional identity and this identity, according to Wenger (1998), is very closely connected to teachers' practice. This process starts with teachers' pre-service years and continues right up until their retirement (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Walkington (2005) suggested that "teacher identity is based on the core beliefs one has about teaching and being a teacher; beliefs that are continuously formed and reformed through experience" (p.3). The identity one has as a teacher will not stay static throughout one's teaching career. As a teacher's beliefs about teaching change based on the experiences he or she has with the teaching profession, so will his or her identity as a teacher

change. Teacher identity, then, may be flexible and malleable and should be open to, instead of resistant to, change. However, teachers as a group are not always wholeheartedly receptive to change, especially change to something so personal and sacred to them as their identity as a teacher.

Concept of Teacher Identity

There are different schools of thought regarding teacher identity. Some see teacher identity as being closely connected to the self-concept of the individual and that this influences how one teaches as well as how one develops as a teacher and what attitudes one has towards change (Knowles, 1992; Nais, 1989). Others see the emphasis placed on the role of the teacher and what he or she should be like as a professional (Cooper & Olsen, 1996; Kerby, 1991). It is important to take both the self and the role of the teacher into consideration when talking about teacher identity; it is composed of both person and context (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). In many cases a teacher will start out with the role defining his or her identity as a teacher (for example, I am someone who teaches Grade nine) but will evolve to the point where the self becomes part of the teacher's identity (ex. I am a grade 9 teacher). Beijaard et al. (2004) argued that "identity formation is a process of practical knowledge-building characterized by an ongoing integration of what is individually and collectively seen as relevant to teaching" (p. 123). Teacher identity is something that may change and evolve as the individual teacher grows in experience and is exposed to more educational ideas and practices.

A teacher's identity is unique and personal, a characteristic that shapes teaching style and practice (Walkington, 2005). This is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to encourage a teacher to change his or her teaching practices. It is just like suggesting that an individual teacher is not quite right and needs to make changes in who he or she is as a person.

The ways in which teachers form their professional identities are influenced by both how they feel about themselves and how they feel about their students. This professional identity helps them to position or situate themselves in relation to their students and to make appropriate and effective adjustments in their practice and their beliefs about and engagement with, students. (James-Wilson, 2001, p. 29)

Walkington (2005) suggested that one of the core activities in which teachers participate is reflection upon one's own practices, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences. This is what aids an individual teacher in forming a teacher identity. Reio Jr. (2005) suggested that there is even more involved in influencing a teacher's identity. He stated that "risk taking, emotions, and professional vulnerability significantly contribute to teachers' identity formation" (p. 986). Those teachers who are not willing or able to take a risk professionally may not see much change in their identity as a teacher throughout their careers.

Ponticell (2003) studied the concept of risk taking as it influences the development of teacher identity and indicated that teacher' perceptions of uncertainty and loss in regards to altering a traditional and comfortable teaching practice determine the amount of risk that a teacher is willing to take. Similar to Reio Jr.'s (2005) proposal is that one of the biggest factors influencing a teacher's risk taking is his or her emotional reactions to school reform. If one has positive feelings towards school reform then one will be more likely to reflect upon his or her core beliefs as a teacher and be a willing participant in the change process. If one does not have positive feelings toward the concept of school reform, however, then that teacher will be unwilling to take any risks that might lead to a change in his or her practice and identity as a teacher. That teacher, unfortunately, may continue to choose to work in isolation and his or her

students will not receive the positive benefit to their learning that comes from a teacher who is willing to reflect on current practice and take some risks by making changes if needed.

As far back at 1975, Lortie identified that teachers tended to practice their craft as well as learn about their profession in isolation from their colleagues. Twenty-five years after Lortie's statement, Richard Elmore (2000) provided criticism of the isolation and revered quality of the individual classroom teacher. Elmore described the American educational situation as a "loosely-coupled" system with a "weak and uncertain" technical core which is "buffered" from any outside judgment and investigation by others (p.6). This does not paint a pretty picture of the teaching profession. Essentially it is criticized as a system of incompetent teachers who protect each other from any outside reform or judgment and simply maintain the status quo.

One solution to that may be to open up the classrooms, so to speak, and engage teachers in collaboration and honest discourse about what needs to be changed in order to improve student learning and how to change it. According to Coldron and Smith (1999), a teacher's identity is revealed in his or her classroom practice. Teachers need to be willing to share what is working and what is not working so well for them in the classroom in addition to being willing to make the changes necessary to benefit the students. This may seem to be a very practical and logical solution to the problem, but if it involves teachers changing their practice, and ultimately their identity as a teacher, it will likely be met with resistance. That doesn't mean, however, that the resistance cannot be overcome.

Teacher Identity and Resistance to Change

Change is not an easy task for many people, and teachers are no exception. Teachers, especially those who are further along in their careers, have developed routines and traditions regarding what they teach, how they teach, and what they think about teaching. Asking teachers

to take a risk to make a change in one, or all, of these areas will likely lead to some level of resistance and while some teachers will eventually accept the change, albeit grudgingly, others may flat out refuse to change anything at all. Often, the amount of resistance a person displays is directly proportional to the degree of change and the amount of new learning required (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). The idea of becoming a participant in a PLC may be very threatening to some teachers precisely because of the potential amount of change and new learning that may come as a result.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) differentiated between two kinds of change: technical change and adaptive change. Technical change is described as the type of change wherein the person making the change has the skills necessary to accomplish the change. On the other hand, adaptive change is a change in culture and values and this can stimulate resistance because it forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity as well as challenge their sense of competence. Becoming a member of a PLC requires an adaptive type of change, which may not be a comfortable idea for many teachers. Teaching is a highly personal activity and is connected intrinsically to an individual teacher's sense of identity. Given this, there has been some resistance to the implementation of new practices such as participating in a PLC. The extent to which a teacher may be willing to participate in a PLC is influenced by the extent to which this will challenge the teacher's existing identity (Day, 2002).

Research demonstrates that how many years a teacher has put into the teaching profession has an impact on how accepting he or she will be of an adaptive change like becoming a member of a PLC (Reio Jr., 2005). Hargreaves (1994) put forth that it is in fact the case that those with more years of teaching experience are less likely to take risks, accept change and adapt to educational reform than those with fewer years of teaching experience. Reio Jr.

(2005) submitted that teachers with less than six years of teaching experience were more likely to accept and even welcome change while those with 20 years or more years of teaching experience were more likely to reject change. Reio Jr. (2005) stated that “teachers with 20 or more years of experience, who may have been hardened by negative experiences with repeated reform, were more likely to react negatively or ambivalently to change and were less likely to take risks to implement reforms that entailed learning new skills or changing their core beliefs” (p.3). Learning new skills and challenging core beliefs go hand in hand with participating in a PLC that has improved learning outcomes for students as its foremost goal.

Teacher Identity and Teacher Interaction

It is difficult for some teachers to take the risk and expose their teaching strengths and weaknesses to their colleagues in a PLC because, as stated previously, teaching is a very personal activity which is linked to an individual teacher’s sense of identity. Even if this concept seems logical and practical to teachers, there still may be the tiny voice in the head of the individual teacher that continues to say, “I must be doing something wrong” or “I must not be a good enough teacher on my own”. According to Servage (2008), this fear comes from the traditional model of the teacher working in isolation.

Teaching, always characterized as a psychologically isolated and isolating activity, suddenly becomes not only a more public undertaking, but a publicly threatening one, as teachers are asked to lay bare their assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses before their colleagues. And the more that collaborative work tends toward the sort of communicative dialogue required for authenticity and sustainability, the more likely it is to generate challenges to teachers’ identity integrity. (Servage, 2008, p. 71)

Teachers who have those fears need to realize that the goal of the PLC is not to judge the individual teacher members as incompetent, but instead to work in collaboration with their colleagues to discover the best methods of teaching and assessing students that will ultimately benefit their learning the most.

It has been suggested that for student learning to improve, teachers must question and examine their current ways of doing things and that may require them to unlearn and abandon those engrained understandings of teaching and learning that are not supporting student learning (Spillane & Louis, 2002). An appropriate forum for this questioning and unlearning is the PLC. It also provides an opportunity for new ideas to surface, honest dialogue to take place, and adaptive changes to be implemented. This type of change will take time as it requires the individual teacher to honestly reflect on his or her teaching, if that is even possible to do. It also obliges the teacher to learn how to work in collaboration with others. Mitchell and Sackney (2001) maintained that each individual teacher must build the capacity for learning how to be a member of a PLC:

From the perspective of schools, personal capacity is an amalgam of all the embedded values, assumptions, beliefs, and practical knowledge that teachers carry with them and of the professional networks and knowledge bases with which they connect. Building personal capacity entails a confrontation with these explicit and implicit structures in such a way that teachers come to grips with the personal narratives that shape and constrain their professional practice and learning. This confrontation is necessary because new learning always accretes onto prior layers of knowledge and existing belief systems. (para. 11)

This is not an easy task as it requires one to seriously look at his own practice and potentially let go of many of the traditions which define him, in his own mind, as an educator. Argyris (2004) observed, “asking human beings to alter their theory-in-use is asking them to question the foundation of their sense of competence and self-confidence” (p. 10). Teaching is such a personal endeavor in part because teachers put so much of themselves into how they teach. Challenging a teacher to change some of his or her practices is challenging him or her to change some of him or herself. Although this can be difficult, it is not impossible.

According to Battey and Franke (2008), teachers do not develop their identities as teachers in isolation. One of the things that can influence teacher identity is working with others in collaboration. The identity of a teacher is very rich and complex (Wenger, 1998) and, as such, should be nurtured and cultivated under conditions surrounded by mutual respect and open communication (Sachs, 2001). Teachers should participate in dialogue, be aware of the many approaches and ways of doing things, be engaged with a range of resources, and share ideas so that they can locate themselves (Coldron & Smith, 1999). This describes many of the activities that a member of a PLC has the opportunity to engage in. These activities have the potential to improve the learning and practice of the individual teacher and, therefore, have the potential to improve student learning outcomes.

Something that one should pay attention to when establishing a PLC in a school is the value of the knowledge and experience of the collective participants. The PLC is a place to share this knowledge and experience for the benefit of all involved. Lieberman and Mace (2009) maintained that “starting with teachers’ knowledge dignifies the ‘wisdom of practice’ and helps open teachers’ classrooms to inquiry, breaks the isolation that keeps teachers from becoming colleagues and forms the basis for a professional learning community” (p.469). The purpose of

the PLC is not to shine light on all of the weaknesses of the individual teacher members, but to draw attention to and share those practices, strategies, and ideas that are working to improve student learning and then build on them. If teachers see that their identity is not being threatened and that their knowledge and experience is valued, they will be more likely to become actively engaged members of the PLC.

An individual's identity as a teacher may be intricately linked to the existing culture of the school, especially if that particular teacher has spent a significant number of years teaching in that building. Some staff members may even prefer and insist upon continuing to work autonomously instead of working in collaboration with other colleagues. Some teachers may see participating in a PLC as an abdication of their power over their own teaching.

Isolation versus collaboration. Teachers' practices and their classrooms are sacred (Lortie, 1975). Teachers can simply close their classroom door, both figuratively and literally, to the influence of the outside world. This phenomenon explains the case of the individual teacher who has not changed anything about his or her teaching and assessment practices for the past thirty years. Teachers are well-educated professionals who realize the value and importance of keeping current in one's profession. They would likely not want to be under the knife of a surgeon who had not changed his or her surgery practices in thirty years, yet some of them continue to be resistant to change when it comes to their own professional practices. These may be the same teachers who are resistant to the idea of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC.

Collaborating with colleagues can be a difficult process to get used to if all a teacher has previously practiced is working autonomously in isolation. Traditionally teachers have taught in their individual classrooms with the doors closed to any outside influences. Unless there were problems in the classroom or complaints from parents, the teacher was left alone to practice his

or her craft largely uninterrupted (Elmore, 2000). One of the problems with working in isolation, however, is that an individual teacher is not exposed to different ways of doing things and may begin to believe that his or her way of teaching and assessing student learning is the only way or the best way of doing things. Another potential problem is that an individual teacher does not get to share the successes and struggles of his or her own experiences and the experiences of the other teachers in the building. Kanold, Tonchef, and Douglas (2008) described teacher isolation as “the enemy of improvement” (p.23). Teachers are unable to improve their teaching methods and strategies or become fluent in the new research on learning improvement if they remain sequestered and continue to work in isolation.

Some researchers see it as necessary to challenge what has been seen in the past as the entitlement of private practice and instead create a culture of collaboration (Kanold et al., 2008). Some teachers may see it as their professional right to work in isolation; as long as they are teaching the curriculum and fulfilling their professional duties, why should they have to work with anyone else in collaboration. Elbousty and Bratt, in their 2010 study on teachers working in collaborative environments, stated:

It is certainly the case that a few teachers (in our survey, two of six) prefer to work in isolation, even when offered the opportunity to work with others. They view their solitude as beneficial to their work, and they view themselves as experts in their fields and in pedagogical practice. They feel that, for them, to collaborate means to mentor less capable teachers. They state that they work diligently in isolation and that collaboration slows their progress. (p.5)

When a teacher feels very strongly about preferring to work in isolation and resists any attempt at collaboration whole-heartedly it can be almost impossible to encourage them to change. This

can present a challenge to the administrator who wants to establish sustainable PLCs in his or her school. The move to an environment of collaboration falls under the category of Heifetz & Linsky's (2002) second order change which can be very difficult for some individuals. Changing to a process of collaboration also requires teachers to challenge educational tradition as well as the structure of the school day. "Historically, schools have been structured so that teachers work alone, rarely given time together to plan lessons, share instructional practices, assess students, design curriculum, or help make administrative or managerial decisions" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p.11). Administrators may be required to restructure the school time-table to facilitate opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively in a PLC. After this time has been made available, however, teachers may still need to be gently nudged in the collaborative direction and this may require a change in the culture of the school. Changing the culture of a school is not an easy task, especially if the existing school culture and structures favor privacy and isolation (Darling-Hammond et al, 2009). This is one of the reasons why it is often difficult to establish sustainable PLCs at the high school level.

Teacher Identity and Feelings of Efficacy

PLCs are integral for improving student learning outcomes and for promoting teacher learning, but they can also be important tools for establishing feelings in teachers of belonging to something that is making a difference. This can be career altering for a teacher, both professionally and personally. When individuals work together in a learning community towards a shared purpose, they feel that they have worth and have something in common with other teachers (Lambert, 2003). Collaborating with other teachers and having the opportunity to share one's ideas and learn from others may validate for a teacher that he or she is doing their job or that he or she is a good teacher.

This feeling of belonging to something bigger, however, can only be accomplished if the teacher is willing to take an honest look at his or her professional practices and be willing to share these with the PLC. The teacher must be willing to learn from others and, possibly, transform his or her own professional practices.

Transformative learning for teachers requires that they be willing and able to critically explore, articulate, negotiate, and revise their beliefs about themselves, their students, their colleagues, and their schools. Only through this level of self-awareness can teachers, in turn, understand their colleagues' foundational perspectives and critically evaluate not only the content and processes of proposed practices, but also the philosophies that underlie them, and their potential long-term consequences. (Servage, 2008, p. 70)

This level of self-awareness is not easy to achieve and requires a great deal of self-reflection on one's strengths and weaknesses. If one can overcome these obstacles and take advantage of the opportunity to become a member of a PLC, however, the rewards can be immeasurable, both personally and professionally.

An educational study involving teachers working in PLCs in Finland and England found that they can have a positive effect on teacher well-being (Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja, Hämäläinen & Poikonen, 2009). Although the researchers admitted that there can also be negative effects to teacher well-being as a result of participation in a PLC, they chose to focus on the positive effects. Wenger and Snyder (1998) maintained that PLCs “are about knowing, but also about being together living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human” (p. 134). When a teacher feels that he or she is doing meaningful work as a part of a group that is trying to make a difference in improving student learning outcomes, he or she is going to feel a sense of belonging and this, in turn, will have a positive effect on his or her sense

of well-being. Hannikainen and van Oers (1999) completed a research study on the concept of togetherness in the context of a PLC. They maintained that group members tended to maintain, or even strengthen, the sense of group togetherness in an attempt to counter any conflicts that may arise during the course of the collaboration activities. This demonstrates a need and a desire on the part of the individual teachers involved in a PLC to protect the sense of belonging and positive well-being that is a product of collaborating with colleagues for a common purpose. Once teachers experience a feeling of belonging to something that matters and is making a difference for students, they might not want to give that up without a fight. It may take a while for all teachers to buy into the concept and process of the PLC, but once one also experiences the professional and personal positive effects of the PLC, one will continue to want to belong to such a community.

Conceptual Framework

The literature reviewed in this chapter points to the use of PLCs in the field of education as a form of professional development. Involvement in a PLC, as with any other form of professional development, has the potential to affect teacher identity; that is, the core beliefs about teaching and being a teacher that are held by an individual and which are continuously being formed and reformed as a result of experience (Walkington, 2005). In addition to the potential effect that PLCs have on teacher identity, there are other factors that have an influence on both the PLC and teacher identity. The factors that may influence the PLC include: leadership, the culture of change, effectiveness of the PLC, a high school setting, and the impact of the PLC on student learning. The factors that may influence teacher identity include: resistance to change, teacher interaction, collaboration versus isolation, and feelings of efficacy. All of the above factors were present in the literature reviewed for this study.

Figure 1 depicts the concepts of professional development, PLCs, and teacher identity as well as the factors influencing each, as highlighted in the research literature. The framework illustrates that PLCs, falling under the umbrella of professional development, can influence teacher identity while, at the same time, teacher identity can influence PLCs. In addition, there are dynamics which exist within a school that may have an impact on PLCs as well as aspects of a teacher's circumstances or current belief system that may have an impact on teacher identity. What the framework is missing, and what this study will examine, is the effect, if any, of PLCs on teacher identity including the impact on professional interaction with colleagues and the impact on student learning.

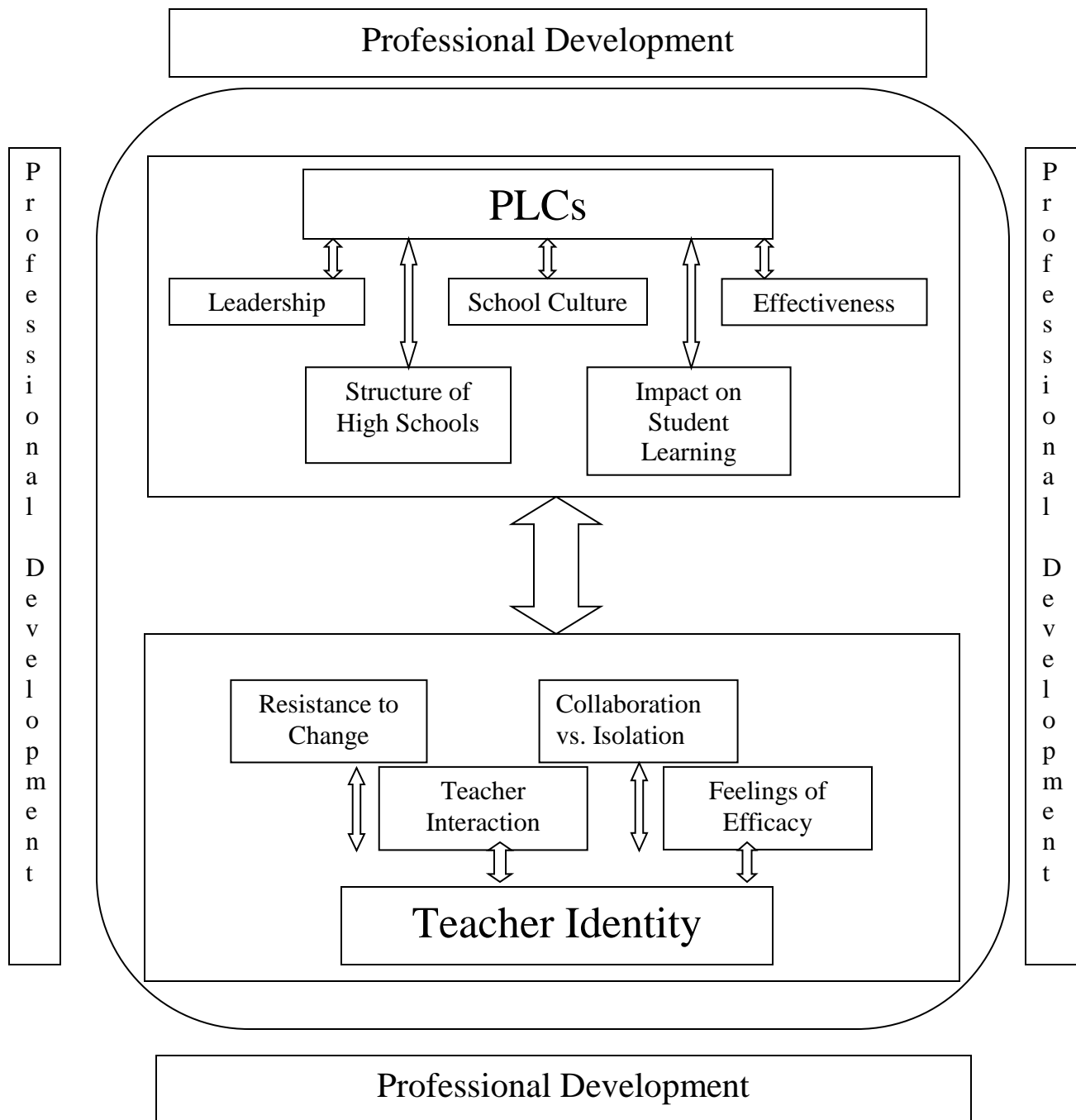


Figure 1. Conceptual framework diagram.

Summary

The literature review has revealed benefits of PLCs in relation to improving student learning as well as the difficulties surrounding their establishment and sustainability, specifically in a high school setting. One of the determining factors for the success or failure of the PLC appears to be leadership and it has been suggested that a PLC will only be effectively implemented in a school where it is strongly supported by the administrator (DuFour, 2002).

Research on the concept of teacher identity has also been presented and it suggested why teachers may be resistant to change initiatives, including the institution of PLCs. If they can overcome that resistance, there is the potential for increased benefits to both teacher and student learning. Research has been presented that suggests that if student learning is to improve, teachers need to question and examine their current practices and perhaps even unlearn and abandon those practices and understandings which are not supporting student learning (Spillane & Louis, 2002).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine and explore the concept of PLCs in a high school setting and how teacher identity is affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC. A qualitative research approach using narrative inquiry was used in order to fully explore the “lived experiences” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii) of the participants in the PLC. This chapter describes the rationale for the research design, the methodology used, and the research context. In addition, the data collection procedures and the strategies for data analysis are addressed.

Research Design and Rationale

Owing to the fact that this research study involves the personal viewpoints of individual teachers and their experiences as participants of PLCs, the qualitative method of narrative inquiry was a natural choice of methodology. Narrative inquiry tells the story of an individual’s human experience and provides researchers with the opportunity to explore and study the way an individual experiences life through his or her stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) purported that education and the experiences that are connected to it should be studied narratively. Because of this, I chose to use narrative inquiry to examine how teacher identity is affected through the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC.

People have a need for stories in order to tell their tales of important events that happen to them (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). In addition, stories very often help people to make meaning of their lives (Webster & Mertova, 2007). People have been telling stories for thousands of years in an attempt to make sense of the world around them. Children learn to share their experiences

with others by telling either long detailed stories or short summarized ones. Adults share the stories of their experiences in the same way. These narratives help to provide connections to the events that have taken place in an individual's life:

Stories help to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience: the past with the present, the fictional with the "real", the official with the unofficial, the personal with the professional, the canonical with the different and unexpected.

Stories help us transform the present and shape the future for our students and ourselves so that it will be richer than the past. (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, pp. 242-243)

The participants in this study were able to personalize this process through the telling of and reflection upon their stories pertaining to their participation in a PLC.

Narrative inquiry, whether an exploration of the stories of young children or adult educators, is not a concrete and objective reconstruction of the events as they took place, but rather a version of how those events were perceived by the participant (Webster & Mertova, 2007). As a result, the conclusions of research that is based in narrative inquiry must not be considered conclusive, but open-ended instead (Polkinghorne, 1988). One of the concerns with narrative inquiry as a methodology is that the narrative being told may appear to be presented as truth or it may be interpreted differently by different people, especially people with different cultural backgrounds from the narrator (Conle, 2000). However, if the researcher is able to use language that is clear and direct and is cognizant of keeping the research open-ended, these concerns should be quelled (Conle, 2000).

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), people are in a continuous process of personal change and it is important, from an educational standpoint, to narrate the person in terms of the process of change. In this research study, I have attempted to narrate the process of

an individual's change in identity throughout the course of participating in a PLC that has improved student learning as its goal. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2006), enhancing personal and social growth is one of the purposes of narrative inquiry and I endeavored to achieve that objective with this study.

Clandinin and Connelly (2006) developed three commonplaces of narrative inquiry- temporality, sociality, and place- to serve as checkpoints for the researcher to direct his or her attention during the process of narrative inquiry. This served as a framework for the study. Temporality speaks to the nature of narrative inquiry. The people whose stories are being told are always in transition from the past to the present to the future and this must be understood by both the narrator and the reader (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). The story being told by the participant may not apply to them later on in their career. Sociality as a commonplace is concerned with the relationship between the narrator and the participant. It is impossible not to engage in relationship with a person who is telling you their story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). Stories are part of the person telling them and help the narrator to get to know the participant on a more personal level. The final commonplace is place. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) stated that "all events take place in some place" (p. 481) and the narrative inquirer must be aware that the place may have an effect on the experience that is being recounted. The participant may not have a similar experience if he or she were situated somewhere else.

Chase (2005) maintained that there are five analytic lenses through which contemporary narrative researchers view material. The first lens sees narrative inquiry as a *unique style of conversation*. With the second lens, narratives are seen as *spoken actions which tell a story by way of explaining, defending, complaining, entertaining, etc.* With the third lens, the narrative researchers see that *a variety of social resources and/or circumstances may serve to enable or*

constrain the stories that are told. In the fourth case, the narratives are treated as *performances found in social situations which are produced for a particular audience.* Lastly, *narrative researchers see themselves as narrators and, as such, investigate ways to present their own ideas about the narratives studied.* Although these lenses may be seen as distinct, the narrative researcher will find that they are all interconnected (Chase, 2005).

In this research study, I attempted to employ all five of these lenses in the data collection process. The narrative that have presented is a unique conversation between myself and the reader in which I tell three different stories by describing the experiences of the participants. The circumstances surrounding the participants belonging to a common PLC serves to enable the stories that are told and the stories are treated as individual scenes from the social situations in the PLC. I experienced the fifth lens through the theming of the data where I had an opportunity to present my ideas about the narratives.

Narrative Inquiry as Autobiography

An autobiography is essentially a person's narrative about their own life experiences told from their own perspective and, as such, is no less valuable than a person's narrative about their life experiences as told through the interpretation of the researcher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). The important thing to consider with autobiography, as with any other personal narrative, is that it should not be construed as a universal truth. It is the account of an experience as told from the perspective of a particular individual. The same experience may be recounted in a completely different way by a different individual. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1988), "any piece of autobiographical writing is a particular reconstruction of an individual's narrative, and there could be other reconstructions" (p. 39).

The Setting

The setting of the research study involving the PLC was a high school with a population of approximately 650 students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The PLC was made up of teachers from a variety of teaching areas based in the humanities: English, History, Native Studies, Law, and Psychology. In addition, the teachers involved in the PLC taught anywhere from grade 9 to grade 12. All of the teachers involved in the PLC were concerned with the students' ability to produce writing assignments of grade level caliber or higher. As a result, the goal of this particular PLC was improved student learning outcomes in the area of writing.

The setting for the interviews took place in the afore-mentioned school for two different reasons. First and foremost, I wanted to make the interview experience as easy and comfortable as possible for the participants. The first interview was conducted in February 2011, a very busy time of year for teachers as they are just starting up a new semester. I knew that if I wanted to acquire volunteers to give up their time to be interviewed, I had to make it very convenient for them to do so. I was very flexible with time and allowed the participants to choose the time for the interview that best suited their needs. Secondly, I wanted the teachers participating in the interview to be comfortable in the process. I chose to conduct the interviews in a setting where they were already used to speaking to me on both a personal and professional basis in the hopes that the interviewees would feel as though they were simply having a conversation about the PLC. This is something that happens naturally in the building and would not be construed as out of the ordinary, forced, or contrived by the participants.

The Participants

Creswell (2007) advised that a researcher using narrative inquiry should focus on the life experiences and stories of one or more participants and then spend a considerable amount of time

gathering their stories. Purposeful sampling was used to select the two participants for this study and their participation was on a voluntary basis. Once permission to access was acquired, the participants were approached by e-mail and they then received a package of information, including a permission form, outlining the research study. The application for this study, for which approval was granted by the Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioral Science Research, is included in Appendix A.

My goal in sampling was to choose participants with abundant information who would allow me to study their stories in-depth (Mertens, 2010). The framework of the study allowed me to choose any of the participants of the PLC in the particular high school where I taught.

In addition to the two participants in the sample, I chose to include my own personal narrative in the study as I was also a member of the afore-mentioned PLC. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), one of the possible starting points for narrative inquiry is the narrator, him or herself. As narrator, I also had a story to tell about my own experience in the PLC. This is termed “narrative beginnings” by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and it is central to narrative inquiry in that it can help the narrator deal with questions of his or her own identity regarding the research. This also helps to position the researcher in the middle of the experience being studied. Since I was both the researcher and one of the participants in the study, it was important for me to realize that who I am and the experiences I have had, has had an effect on how I told the stories of others.

Although it is predominately a feature of a phenomenological research study (van Manen, 1990), I felt that it is important that I bracket my own role in this study. I was both the researcher and one of the participants whose narrative is being told and, as a result, had to bracket my own experiences in this study. According to Moustakas (1994), this means that I could not let my own

experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon, in this case the particular PLC that myself and the other two participants are members of, obscure the perceptions of the other participants. In addition, I could not let my own biases seep into the questions I asked or the manner in which I asked them. In order to do this, I used the words of the participants when writing their narratives. I was also conscious of my own bias as I was theming the data. Although it is almost impossible to completely remove all biases, I was constantly aware of their potential to skew both the data collection and data analysis processes and made an effort to minimize their effect.

Field Texts

In using narrative inquiry as a methodology, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) deigned to use the term ‘field texts’ to describe any of the data that was collected while in the field. Conducting in-depth interviews is one method of creating field texts used by narrative inquirers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004). The participants in this study took part in two semi-structured interview sessions, some of which required follow-up questions or clarification which was done either by e-mail or in person. As I was both researcher and participant, there is an autobiographical field text included in the data analysis. There is another component to the field texts which consists of the participants’ written response to a reflective prompt. This response is approximately one page in length.

The Interview Method

I chose the semi-structured interview as the data collection method for this research study. One of the most prevalent and compelling methods used to examine and understand the experiences of others is the interview (Fontana & Frey, 2003). The semi-structured interview format allowed me to be flexible with the questions I asked and follow the flow of the conversation as it unfolded. It allowed for the possibility that the participant’s responses to the

interview questions may lead the conversation in a completely different direction than I anticipated and result in the collection of more authentic and rich data.

The focus of the research study was to examine and explore the concept of PLCs in a high school setting and how teacher identity is affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC, so the interview questions were designed to uncover this data (Appendix B).

Each participant took part in two interviews which were approximately 45 minutes in length. In addition to the questions outlined in Appendix B, questions were asked for clarification, definition and to delve further into a particular answer. The questions were designed to be open-ended to facilitate the progression of the conversation. Using semi-structured open-ended questions gave me the opportunity as researcher to obtain a greater depth of data than I would have obtained using a fully structured design with direct questioning (Fontana & Frey, 2003). The open-ended questions also gave the participants the opportunity to tell their own stories and not simply answer the questions asked.

I conducted the interviews with the aid of a recording device and then transcribed them. The participants then had the opportunity to read the transcript and make any changes that they deemed necessary. The names of both the participants and the school that they teach at have been changed to provide them with anonymity as stated in the application for ethics. In addition, I removed any verbatim context or situational identifiers that may compromise the anonymity of the participants.

Use of Voice

The analysis of the data collected using narrative inquiry must focus on the stories that are told (Mertens, 2010). A marked characteristic of narrative inquiry is its use of literary devices

such as “ topics, plots, themes, beginnings, middles, ends, and other border features that are assumed to be the defining characteristics of stories” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 226).

Although themes are a defining characteristic of stories, narrative researchers must listen to the voice within each interview first before pinpointing apparent themes across the interviews (Chase, 2005). One of the voices that it is necessary for the researcher to listen to is his or her own.

Chase (2005) put forth the idea that there are three strategies used by narrative researchers to understand how to use their voice to interpret and represent the narrator’s voice: an authoritative voice, a supportive voice, or an interactive voice. When a researcher uses an authoritative voice, he asserts that his interest in the narrator’s stories is different than that of the narrator (Chase, 2005). The focus is on the interpretation of the narrator’s stories. The treatment given to the original narratives depends completely upon the researcher’s attitude and the precautions he or she takes (Czarniawska, 2002).

The supportive voice is completely the opposite from the authoritative voice in that the researcher thrusts the narrator’s voice into the spotlight (Chase, 2005). Even though the researcher is still solely responsible for editing the narratives, organizing them and deciding which parts of the narrative will be included in the data analysis, the primary goal is to have the narrator’s story told, not the researcher’s interpretation of it (Chase, 2005). As a result, the research should not be used to establish authenticity, but instead to create a distance between the voices of the narrator and the researcher that is both self-reflective and respectful (Chase, 2005).

The last form of voice employed by the researcher using narrative inquiry is the interactive voice. With this strategy, according to Chase (2005), the interaction between the voices of the narrator and the researcher is displayed. This gives the researcher the opportunity to

examine his or her own voice, complete with all of his or her own past life experiences and interpretations, through the altered avenue of the narrator's voice (Chase, 2005). In utilizing narrative inquiry as a methodology, the researcher is not married to one particular strategy for employing voice, but is free to shift back and forth between the three of them (Chase, 2005). I employed the interactive voice in this study because I was examining my own narrative in addition to two other teachers' narratives regarding the effects of being an active member of a professional learning community on teacher identity. I also used the supportive voice in that I recounted the narratives of other teachers, using their own words to do so.

Analysis of Data

Before a complete analysis of the data can be undertaken, the narrative researcher must read and re-read the data collected and sort them in some way to determine just what data they have (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Riessman (1993) explained that "close and repeated listening, coupled with methodic transcribing, often leads to insights that in turn shape how we choose to represent an interview narrative in our texts" (p. 60). Sorting requires the researcher to establish some method of coding the data. In narrative inquiry, the codes used describe the structure of the talk, itself (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Some examples of the ways in which narrative researchers may code the data they have collected are: names of the characters that appear in the stories, places where the events took place, common story lines, noticeable gaps or silences, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative researcher looks for patterns or themes that emerge from the research data both in each individual narrative, as well as across all of the narratives. In doing this, I employed horizontal analysis to search for common patterns, relationships, and practices that persisted across all of the narratives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This horizontal analysis

was depicted in the form of a table (Table 1) which was then clarified. In terms of this research study, some of the themes that emerged were feelings of satisfaction related to the PLC, feelings of frustration related to the PLC, the effect of the PLC on teacher identity, isolation versus collaboration, the effect of the PLC on improving student learning and the change in the types of professional conversations that were occurring between colleagues. I looked for these patterns in the three narratives and explored the themes that emerged.

Unlike other methods of qualitative research, narrative inquiry does not have certain steps to follow in the data analysis stage of research. The narratives are continuously negotiated and revised throughout the entire process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition to having the opportunity to make revisions to the transcripts, the participants in the study had the chance to read the finished narratives and again make any changes they deemed necessary to more fully and accurately describe their experience in the PLC. The creation of the narrative is a process of collaboration between the researcher and the participant (Moen, 2006). In order for it to be a true collaboration, the participant must be given the chance to revise the final narrative, if necessary. I allowed the participants the opportunity to revise both the transcripts of the interviews and the finished narrative before I submitted it for defense.

Piloting the Method

The semi-structured interview questions were all piloted, with a teacher who was not a participant in the study, prior to the data collection. Piloting the questions allowed me to determine if the questions were appropriate for the collection of meaningful data relevant to this study. This same individual also piloted the writing prompt for the same reason. In both cases, the data collected while piloting was analyzed but not used in this study. In addition, once the

interviews were transcribed, I presented them to my research advisor and together we looked for emerging themes.

Presentation of Data

The data is presented in narrative form, which is, using the structures of narrative such as setting, characters, plot, and voice. The presentation of the data also includes description and argument, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) contend are necessary in order to call it narrative inquiry.

In telling the stories of the three participants, I employed thick description. This not only allowed me to capture the thoughts and feelings of the participants, but also illustrate the network of relationships that exist among them (Ponterotto, 2006). According to Denzin (1989),

a thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (p.83)

This is essential in portraying the narratives as accurate depictions of the lived lives of the participants.

Quality and Trustworthiness of Research

As narrative research is all about storytelling, the criteria used to judge traditional qualitative research, including reliability and validity, should not be used (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Each person's story in narrative inquiry is told from his or her own perspective and should not be understood to be fact. Instead, narrative research aims for verisimilitude, which is defined as having the appearance of truth or reality (Webster & Mertova, 2007), and it is for this reason that the results of narrative research should always remain open-ended (Polkinghorne, 1988). According to Amsterdam and Bruner (2000), "stories derive their convincing power not from verifiability but from verisimilitude: they will be true enough if they ring true" (p. 30). The stories must have a sense of authenticity to them which be achieved when the researcher provides enough information so that the reader is convinced that the story was told in an honest and sincere manner (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The narratives in this research study are true from the perspective of those telling the story. To ensure verisimilitude, I have told the stories of the participants as they have told them. I used their own words to tell their own stories.

The concept of validity traditionally refers to tests or measuring instruments that have the goal of producing certainty (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This is not true for narrative research as it does not aim to arrive at conclusions of certainty in the telling of people's stories. Validity in narrative inquiry refers instead to the research being well-grounded and supportable by the data that has been collected (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The data collected throughout the interview process contains the stories of people's experiences, not universal truths of how things should be.

In other forms of qualitative research, reliability is a tool used to describe how consistent and stable the measuring instrument is (Polkinghorne, 1988). The instrument in this research study was the interview. However, in narrative research, reliability does not mean the same thing. The reliability of the instrument is not in question in narrative inquiry. Instead it is the trustworthiness of the field notes and the transcripts of the interviews (Polkinghorne, 1988). The issue of trustworthiness can be overcome by allowing the participants of the interview to read

over the transcripts, and even the narratives themselves, and make any revision that they deem necessary to improve the accuracy of their stories. I gave the participants in this study the opportunity to do just that.

Ethical Considerations

The research protocol established by the University of Saskatchewan ethics board was followed for this research study and the application for this research study has been included in Appendix A. All participants in this study signed informed consent forms as well as forms allowing for the release of the data that was collected. These are included in Appendix C. In addition, the names of the participants as well as the name of the high school where they teach and are members of the PLC in question were changed so as to provide the participants with anonymity. I transcribed the interviews myself and assured the participants of the confidential nature of their interviews.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodology used in this research study as well as the ethical considerations involved. Using narrative inquiry allows people to satisfy their need to tell of their experiences through stories and this study allowed the participants to do just that. Narrative research attempts to tell the whole story of an individual's experience. It is not to be taken as truth or fact but, instead, to be left open-ended.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS: INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of PLCs in a high school setting and explore how teacher identity may be affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC. I chose narrative inquiry as my methodology to tell the individual stories of teachers and their experiences with participating in a PLC at the high school level. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (p. 20) and that is what I have done in submitting the field texts from my research. In this section, I will be presenting the individual narratives of the participants, including my autobiographical narrative, related to their experiences within the PLC and their feelings pertaining to those experiences.

The data from the narratives is displayed in the same way for all three of the narratives. After an initial introduction of each participant, the narratives pertaining to their sense of identity are told to provide a glimpse into each character and their background. Immediately following that section, the narratives regarding their experiences with the interdisciplinary PLC are related. These experiences are broken down into narratives arising from the first interview and those from the second interview so that the reader can witness the vertical growth, if any, of each participant after a longer period of exposure to the PLC. It was difficult for me to do that with my autobiographical narrative because of my own bias. As a result, I commented on my own perceived growth in the following chapter. The end of this section contains a table which is a collection of evidence from each participant’s transcripts indicating the feelings they experienced as members of the PLC. This table provides an opportunity to compare the feelings of the

participants for similarities and differences. Later on in Chapter 5, I provided a horizontal analysis of the themes which emerged from these narratives (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

John Smith

John Smith is a teacher of Humanities subjects at Sacred Heart High School. He is mid-way through his teaching career and has taught at the same high school for his entire career. He also volunteers countless hours of his own time to coach students on the football field. Helping students to be the best that they can be is of paramount importance to John. My observations of John from my field notes were that he is a very confident individual who is very passionate about teaching and doing a good job with the students.

Sense of Identity

John had the sense that he would become a teacher from an early age due to the family influences in his life. Two significant people in his life were teachers and they are part of what prompted his foray into education.

My grandma was a teacher and my mom was a teacher before she started having kids. I knew that a good teacher was someone that could make a difference in someone's life and I really hoped that that was what I was able to do.

There were other directions in which John could have gone professionally, but teaching was where he ultimately ended up. He has many other interests and he has found a way to incorporate those other interests into his chosen career. He also has an opportunity to share those interests with his students.

I always thought about doing other things too like maybe being a journalist, because I always liked writing and reading probably more than writing. So I liked reading a lot; I

liked cars so maybe an automotive journalist. I liked sports so I could have been a sports journalist. Now, as a teacher though, guess what? You get to stay in sports. I'm an English teacher now so I get to do the reading thing all the time. I get to help people hopefully gain an appreciation for reading and like to read and write so this job basically encompasses a lot of the different interests that I have in my life.

One of the biggest motivating factors for John as a teacher is helping students to achieve their full potential in life and he is very passionate about doing so. This seems to be the most important aspect of teaching for John.

It's not just about school or academics, specifically; it's about helping someone become a well-rounded individual and knowledgeable in areas outside of academics as well. In fact, sometimes I think that what is more important are the life skills that they would learn in the class and the things we would discuss in here and how it helps them be successful, not just in a classroom setting, but like I said, almost more importantly outside of school as well.

John truly believes that there is more to his job than simply teaching his students. For John, the position of teacher carries with it an immense responsibility to change peoples' lives and to help them become the best people they can be. This is not a position to be taken lightly and John also feels that teachers need to acknowledge that they have this important responsibility and can make a difference.

To me, the definition of a teacher is someone that is going to make a positive change in a person's life and hopefully inform and instruct them in a particular area to make them more knowledgeable about it. But again, if you're not changing peoples' lives for the

better, I really think that you're not doing your job as a teacher, I just don't. You're underselling your importance or your potential importance if you say anything different.

It is not a surprise, then, that when asked about his strengths as a professional, John's answer was along similar lines. John cares a great deal about the students he is in charge of and takes the responsibility bestowed upon him very seriously. He is in the business of teaching individuals how to become caring global citizens.

I always say there are two things that are important for someone to be really good at something. They've got to care and they've got to know. I hope that I know what I'm doing and I really try to make sure that I do and I definitely know that I care about what I'm doing and that, to me, is the biggest one. You can have all sorts of talents and abilities and if you don't care or it doesn't matter to you then it's not going to happen. So my biggest strength is that I really care what I'm doing. It really matters to me that people are successful.

John elaborated that he knows that teaching is something he is good at because of the feedback he receives, both short term and long term, especially from past students. He is also very aware that teaching requires constant improvement and recognition of what areas need growth for an individual.

I want to still get more knowledge about my subject areas. Like I want to make sure I know what's going on all the time with English writing and/or maybe some Christian Ethics aspects, maybe. The more I teach I think my patience is getting shorter. My tolerance is starting to get a little shorter, but at the same time my expectations haven't changed. I'd like to think that I'm pretty good at a lot of things, especially professionally,

but I definitely know that I haven't reached my potential. So, what are my areas needing of growth? Everywhere because otherwise it means that I don't need to improve.

Experience with the PLC

As stated in the previous chapter, the PLC discussed in this study is a multi-disciplinary high school teacher group in which the participants teach humanities courses from grades 9 to 12 in the same school. The goal of the PLC is to improve student learning in the area of writing outcomes and to achieve consistency in writing assessment across the various humanities courses being taught throughout the four grades in the high school. One of the main outcomes of the PLC was the development of a common assessment tool, a rubric, which was to be used in all four grades and in all humanities courses. At the present time, the PLC has been meeting for two years and I anticipate that it will continue on into the 2011-2012 school year as well.

John was asked, at two different points in the school year, to elaborate on some of his experiences as a participant in the PLC. In the first interview, John talked about the feeling of validation that he had experienced and the opportunity to engage in dialogue with his colleagues.

We have a chance to share any concerns that we have and/or to know, not so much to make any changes, but to know that we're all on the same page, that we're doing the right thing; to listen to what other people are doing and knowing that yup, you're meeting the standards that are expected. It's nice to be validated that you're on the right track or that you're doing the right thing.

It's good to have a chance to see where you're at and it encourages collegiality so you can ask people questions about how they are doing things and what their approach is for their essays and their writing activities and it's really good.

Later in the narrative John discusses the negative experiences he had with the PLC and, as a result, his second interview re-iterated that having other group members validate what he was bringing to the group was very important to him. His second interview had more of an emphasis on him doing the right things and not being criticized for his ideas.

Seeing how effective this group has been has put my mind at ease, at least that I'm doing the right things and that I'm on the right track and that I'm basically going to avoid any sort of controversy for not doing things the right way. What's satisfying about the PLC is the consistency of the group, knowing that I have been doing things right, knowing that I will hopefully continue to do things right. I don't want to do things the wrong way, I don't want to make mistakes on things if I don't have to, so what makes me happiest is the affirmation or the re-affirmation that the things I'm doing are right and they're effective and they're good.

When the PLC was first formed, John was very enthusiastic about it and was one of the more vocal participants at the meetings. This changed at some point in the process and the negative experiences that John shared with me speak to why this changed for him. John felt that there were members in the PLC who did not think that he was doing his job well and that he was not living up to their expectations. The following two pieces of John's narrative come from his first interview session.

As much as some staff members are great to work with, unfortunately there are some staff members that are not so great to work with. I've felt scrutinized or unfairly scrutinized and unfairly judged based on some of the things that I've submitted or ideas that I've suggested from other people in the group and it's very discouraging. Once I realized that other people were seeing and noticing the same things that I was feeling or

thinking I saw then I started to back off a little bit. Sometimes the mood in those rooms wasn't very relaxed, at least from my perspective, because of the scrutiny.

Talking with (the vice principal), I would go and talk to him outside of those meetings and he seemed to think my ideas were pretty good for essay re-submits and highlighting different parts; although, we saw how that was discredited, so to speak. I'm not changing that because I think it's a good idea and so does he, but other people in the group, again, kind of seem to discredit those ideas as silly or useless or too much or whatever. I'll give anything a chance at the start but if it's going to end up being a punishment for me or a negative, I'll back off pretty quick because it's just not worth it.

There was definitely a more positive tone to John's second interview and this is present in the next pieces of his narrative. At this point in the process, John had been receiving more affirmative comments from other group members and the negative group members seemed to be less of a worry for him

The positives are again being able to contribute and having some good feedback from certain teachers to say, yeah, those were good activities and the negative feedback was some of the scrutiny from some of the other members who apparently believe the assignments were sub-par or the product was sub-par. So I guess the highs and lows of it are the acceptance of it and the reassurance that what I'm doing is good and right and are going in the right direction and the rejection of the things that were presented by me in the meetings.

The positives began outweighing the negatives for John and he began to feel a bit more comfortable in the group once again. He had decided that he was not going to let the negative group members bother him and cause him anxiety.

Anytime you get a group of people together, regardless of the profession, you're going to have good and bad people, you are going to have people who care, people who don't, people who are over-achieving, people who are under-achieving, people who get along with each other, and people who don't; that's human beings and how they interact with each other. I think the more intellectual the group becomes, the more the chance for that hostility because now you have a lot of high-minded people with some really strong set opinions on things, and I'm certainly no different, and that's going to create some potential clashes or conflicts.

Despite the negative experiences that John has had, he continues to be an active participant in the PLC, although he is not as quick to share his ideas as he initially was. Hopefully as the PLC progresses, he will feel encouraged and confident enough to once again impart the wisdom of his experience to the other members in the group.

John feels that his participation in the PLC has led to changes being made in his teaching and assessment practices. However, he also believes that things should not change simply for the sake of change but because there is a good reason for it. This attitude came through clearly in John's first interview.

Being part of the PLC is dealing with a different approach to things than I might normally have done and I'd like to think that the way that I do things is effective for me and it certainly seems to be effective for the students. As a result, I'm going to be resistant to forced change or mandated change unless I can be sure that it's going to make a difference for the people that I'm using it with. So, I guess after giving it a chance, if I don't think something is going to make a huge difference or a huge impact, I don't like change for the sake of change. If it helps people to know better and it gets

people on the same page and the students learn more and know more then I think it's a good thing.

By the time the second interview came around, John had the opportunity to use the common assessment tool that we, as a PLC, had developed and he realized that it would not turn him into a teacher without creative options, but that it would enhance the repertoire he already had.

It's really streamlined my writing activities so that whenever we do a writing activity, it's much easier to explain because once one of my classes has done one of those writing activities, the process is so similar from then on out.

For example, my grade elevens are doing their second essay and once they've been able to do the first one, some of the comments they were making yesterday in class were, look this is the same process we followed before, is it not? And I said yes, basically except for the topic changes, the process doesn't and they said, "Good". So it makes the explanation that much easier and it has definitely helped to create a common ground level that all writing activities can start with and it makes it easier to go from there.

As much as John has enjoyed being a part of the PLC, he does not want it to affect his autonomy and individuality as a teacher. He does see the collaboration leading to greater consistency among teachers as valuable as long as it does not lead to everyone doing exactly the same things in exactly the same ways in their classrooms. John is very hesitant to change what he is doing in the classroom.

I'm really big on freedom of choice and trusting someone to do a job the right way and however it works best for them. Everyone should be on the same page with that or extremely similar. But again, I've said this before, I don't want to be a robot in my class,

I don't want robots as students, I want individuals. So if I lose the individuality in my classroom, that's going to take a major step back in my career and how much I care and the effort level that I give.

I think teachers are really autonomous and certainly something that I enjoy about the job is that I'm being trusted to do something and I will do a good job of it. I sometimes like to do things differently than other people and so do they and, as a result, there's a commonality to this process that might discourage some people and I could see how.

This, too, changed with the second interview and the following piece of John's narrative illustrates the vertical growth he experienced as a result of his participation in the PLC. Once he realized that he was not being asked to compromise his individuality, he was more than willing to use the common assessment tool with his classes. In addition, seeing that the students were reaping the benefits of the assessment tool only served to make it more attractive to John as he is very passionate about helping students to be as successful as they can be.

Once I got on board with it, I still maintain my individuality but use the common tool that everyone else is using. So it benefits the students by having a familiar tool to use and a familiar tool that they see, but then you still have the individual aspect of each teacher fine tuning it as they see fit.

I'm pleasantly surprised by how much it's had a positive impact on my ability to instruct and teach and, as importantly, evaluate. I'm pleasantly surprised by how beneficial using the tool and the things that we've managed to agree on have benefitted my individuality in the classroom.

This last statement from John is very high praise for the professional learning community and goes a long way to showing the positive affect that active participation in a PLC can have on teacher identity.

One of the things that John enjoys about participation in the PLC is the ongoing dialogue between colleagues. He even believes that the way in which he interacts professionally with his colleagues is a direct by-product of his participation in the PLC. Even with his first interview, John was impressed by the collaborative aspect of the PLC.

We all have a chance to voice our opinions or share our concerns or share our approach to things so that we can get on the same page, so it's more collaborative rather than instructional; someone's not trying to say here's how you should do things but here's another way to do things. It's more relaxed.

By the second interview, John was articulating specific benefits to the collegial dialogues that were taking place as a result of the PLC. He was experiencing personal benefits as well as professional ones.

I find that I talk with more people even in other departments like the history department, but even in the English department too. I have more confidence and I'm more at ease to talk to people in the other departments in regards to knowing that we're all working from the same level and that there is consistency going on from one area to the next. There is much more collaboration and discussion with regards to academics and writing in particular because of the rubric that our school has started to implement.

In addition, John has found that the learning achieved through the work of the PLC most likely would not have occurred with a traditional professional development opportunity. He does

not think that the atmosphere would have been the same with traditional professional development sessions as it was with the group collaboration and dialogue that took place within the PLC.

As any individual would when embarking on a new experience, especially one which potentially requires a great deal of change in one's professional practice and perhaps even their identity, John experienced a variety of emotions while participating in the PLC.

Satisfaction - what's satisfying about the PLC is the consistency of the group, knowing that I have been doing things right, and knowing that I will hopefully continue to do things right. What makes me happiest is the affirmation or the re-affirmation that the things I'm doing are right and they're effective and they're good.

Guilt- maybe I'm not living up to expectations of the rest of the group or, more importantly, living up to my own expectations of doing things properly. So if other people are doing things better or differently from me, maybe their way is right and I've been doing things wrong. I'd rather know that and fix it.

Frustration and Anger- the alleged or inferred or implied superiority of certain members of the group, that their way is best and other peoples' ways aren't effective enough or aren't professional enough or aren't adequate enough. The inadequacy aspect that some of the comments in the group, inferred or implied, to discourage participation or cooperation with the group.

The heavy handedness of certain group members and the assumption that their way is best and no other way matters or isn't important enough to consider. The heavy handedness of certain members of the group and their lack of perspective on the ability to

contribute or do what's right or what's expected at certain levels. Also, the unrealistic expectations, potentially, or the just complete lack of perspective from certain people on what's being accomplished at other areas of the school or other levels of the school.

Anxiety- not measuring up to the expectations of certain people in the group or what is expected; not doing things properly as might be seen as necessary.

Enthusiasm- the enthusiasm comes from making some good assignments or having some good activities with good results and being able to share that with the group and maybe they can help their own groups do things better or at least have the chance to do it. So that's where the enthusiasm comes from is knowing that things are effective or work and giving people a chance to see that maybe there's a different activity they can do or a different way to do it that makes things better or easier.

Curiosity- I just wonder what other people are doing. What's effective for them; what isn't effective for them? And learning from people who have been there longer than I have and benefitting from their experiences. What makes me curious is when things work, I want to do those as much as possible and when things don't, I want to avoid those as much as possible. So that's my curiosity . . . what's effective and what isn't?

The point where John's narrative leaves off is not the end of his story. John is only half-way through his teaching career and the experiences he has had as an active member of a PLC in a high school will stay with him as he completes the next half of his professional journey. The experiences John has in his daily teaching life will continue to have an effect on his core beliefs about teaching and how he sees himself as a teaching professional.

Akumal

Akumal is a senior English teacher at Sacred Heart High School and is presently in the second last year of her teaching career. Her plan is to retire after the 2011-2012 school year. Although she has been teaching for almost 31 years, the bulk of her teaching career has been spent at two main places; she has been teaching at Sacred Heart High School for the past 18 years and she spent most of the remaining 13 years working with at-risk high school students in an alternative program. Akumal is a very well respected individual and many staff members go to her for advice, especially in the area of teaching English Language Arts.

Sense of Identity

Akumal, like John, knew that she wanted to become a teacher from a young age, but unlike John's story, she did not have these aspirations as a result of family members and their experiences as educators.

I knew from the time I was in grade four I wanted to be a teacher. I grew up all by myself and I used to play school, put my dolls in desks and play school. I think because I always loved school and I loved everything about it. I love to read and I loved the idea of being able to share that.

I went through elementary education in university and did my teaching there and really decided when I went out and started subbing – I started to do a lot of work in high school – and I just realized that that's where I wanted to be. I was lucky because I had a major in special education, but I had also majored in history and English so it was an easy transition for me to do but I went right from high school through and I couldn't wait to get a job and thirty one years later, here we are.

Along her 31 years journey, Akumal experienced some defining moments that really affirmed for her that she had made the right career choice.

I was really blessed to teach at (the alternative school) early on, the first thirteen years I spent there, and everything that I had never experienced in my own life and everything that I had never learned in university, I learned there. When I think back on it, I could have come here and taught and the transition would have not been so difficult, but to go there from a middle class farm upbringing to teaching kids like that, that's where I consider I got my real education. That, I think, made me a much better teacher than I would have been if I'd just gone into a mainstream school.

It is not a surprise then to hear that building strong trusting relationships is what is most important to Akumal about teaching. As she is at the point in her career where she is looking back and reflecting on just what she will miss the most when she retires, it's those strong relationships that keep coming to the forefront of her thoughts.

It's the relationships with kids that I realize are the most important thing; it's not the lesson, it's not the all of the things that maybe when you're early on in your career that you put so much emphasis on. What I hope kids will remember is that I hope they always felt welcome in my class and I hope that they always felt that I cared, not only about what I was teaching but that it mattered to me that they were there. So, absolutely the relationships are the most important.

Like John, Akumal feels a great responsibility towards her students. Also like John, Akumal does not feel that that her biggest responsibility is necessarily connected to teaching the curriculum. Akumal is very conscious that her students need to feel safe and welcomed by her if they are going to be engaged in what she is teaching.

I hope that I never lose sight of the fact that it is about relationships and that it is about having some fun every day. What I teach is important and it's important to me and I'm passionate about it, but first and foremost it's that when kids come into my classroom, I really think my biggest responsibility to them is that I create a place where they want to be because I think that everything else stems from that. If you don't want to be somewhere, I don't think that you're ever going to engage the way you will if you feel that you want to be there.

Although Akumal has many strengths as a professional, she feels very strongly about the fact that one of her biggest strengths is her ability to connect with students and to treat them all fairly and with great care and attention. This speaks to the fact that not only has she made the right career choice, but also that she has been very successful at achieving her goals. She is cognizant of the fact that she, as a teacher nearing retirement, does not need to focus on the same types of things in the classroom as a newer teacher with less experience.

I think that probably my strengths are relationships with kids. I think they're (strengths) also my subject area because I've been doing this for such a long time and I've made it really a priority to try to be skilled at what I do because I think that I owe that to kids. I think that there is a greater burden on me, because I've taught for 31 years, to provide that more than somebody who is still learning because those aren't my challenges anymore. I don't have to spend time on classroom management, I don't have to do all those things, I'm faster at marking than I used to be so what is your challenge when you hit year 15, year 20? It is to become better at what you do or to change paths or whatever. I always feel like those kids make me want to be a better teacher. I should be a better teacher. And how do I know I'm good at that? You know I don't, other than the

response in the things the kids come back and tell you. The last few years have been really awesome when I've done the grad retreat and the notes that I get from kids, and the things that I'm probably the most proud of are, "you were really hard on us, but you were always fair".

It is also not surprising that the only things that Akumal has come to dislike about her chosen profession are things that may serve to undermine what she believes is in the best interests of her students.

I don't enjoy when I see that I'm being asked to go in a direction that I know is counter-intuitive to what I've come to believe is really important. Also when I feel that we place too much emphasis on the book keeping aspects of our job and so forth. But I mean, to be fair, that's not a huge drawback. I think that we're very lucky in our careers that we have so much autonomy to structure our day and to be able to express what we think is important through our work.

This last statement from Akumal's narrative illustrates that she, like John, values the professional freedom that is part of the job.

Experience with the PLC

It is important to Akumal that the students leave Sacred Heart High School with the academic skills necessary to continue their education if they so choose. As a result, when the writing skills of the students became a concern for the upper level English teachers, Akumal was instrumental in trying to find a way to remedy the situation. It was out of this concern that the PLC involving all of the Humanities teachers at Sacred Heart High School was started. Other members of the PLC introduced ideas that eventually led to creation of the common assessment tool, but the initial push was born out of a concern for student writing and how to improve it.

A lot of informal discussion that was had especially with teachers who were teaching senior classes in the humanities who had concerns that student writing was not where it needed to be. We wondered what we could do about that and concluded that probably we weren't doing enough writing because it's like anything, the more you do of something the better you get at it.

In fact, Akumal was one of the key players in founding the PLC at Sacred Heart High School.

(The assistant principal) was really instrumental in that because I talked to him about it and then some of the department heads started talking and then we found out that a lot of people had an interest and a concern about it. So I think recognizing that it needed to be part of our PD time, that we needed to be given time to do that and I think that there was just a general public will to work on these things. I think it sort of culminated in a paragraph rubric and the essay rubric.

The motivation, for Akumal, was again her feeling of responsibility towards her students. She would not be doing her job if the students were leaving high school with less than acceptable writing skills. Like John, it is very important to Akumal that she help her students be the best that they can be, regardless of their ability levels.

Certainly I feel we have a responsibility to kids, whether they are going to university or any kind of post-secondary, that they leave here literate and when I see a student that I really don't think they are, I think that that really reflects on us. So regardless of where we assume kids are going, and some of those students we think aren't very academic, I think we have a responsibility to them to take them still to the highest level that they can attain. I really think that's a huge responsibility. We have to increase literacy, both

written and oral and their ability to read more difficult texts. I think we have a responsibility to all our students to do that.

Akumal was asked, at two different points in the school year, to elaborate on some of her experiences as a participant in the PLC. During the first interview, her focus was more on creating shared expectations with the common assessment tool developed by the members of the PLC and her own opportunity to learn about what was happening in other classrooms.

It's been very enlightening. For example, I don't know what it's like to teach grade 9 and if teachers only teach grade 9 they don't know, really, what's expected in grade 10, 11 and 12. So it's been really educational for me to see that and I'm looking forward to doing some assessing with Christian Ethics and History to realize that there's so many more similarities than there are differences. But that there still are differences. There are things that I really emphasize in English that might not be emphasized in the same way in some of the other humanities. We don't have time to really talk to each other as much as we'd like to. I've learned a lot about the fact that other people have different priorities or that they see things differently and that I need to be aware of that. Even within my own department not everybody is on the place on their journey that I am so that's important. I think since being involved in the PLC, we've been really making sure that kids have a clear idea of what's expected.

Something that has come through Akumal's narrative as having significance to her is the idea that students are well aware of the expectations of their teachers. Her participation in the PLC to create the common assessment tool was an opportunity for her to help students be more aware of what those expectations are and how they will be assessed on those expectations.

Making that rubric, it was almost like working backwards. If we were going to make this rubric, and then we were going to present it to kids, we all had to be really clear on what we were doing. So I think that it's really made me try to be much clearer to kids about expectations. Even when I had my own children they would come home with an assignment and they would say I don't know what the teacher wants. That shouldn't be a question any kid ever has to ask. It shouldn't be what does the teacher want, it should be clearly laid out, the expectations should be clearly laid out. I think when we were working on the rubric we had to become clearer about what we were expecting and that hopefully we were all expecting the same things. So it isn't that I wonder what they expect when they're in Ms. So and so's class, I wonder what they expect. I really hope that it's helped us move beyond that so that all kids, when they have to write a particular type of essay, are clear on what that looks like and how they'll be assessed on it.

By the time the second interview came along, Akumal had recognized the value of the dialoguing that had been taking place within the group and how she and her students had benefitted from that process. She also had the opportunity to engage in professional dialogue with educators in different settings and discovered that they were experiencing some of the same struggles with student writing as the staff at Sacred Heart.

I think that the bridging that is happening with the elementary school teachers and then, the last meeting that I was at, adding on a third component to that with the university, having a university professor there, and so being able to make both of those bridges has been really interesting for me. Being at the grade twelve end of it, I was always hoping to get some feedback from somebody at the university as to where are they seeing weaknesses and what do they need us to address? So that's been really cool.

I think the interesting thing with the grade eight teachers is that they're saying that when they're showing exemplars to their students, how difficult that process is but how hard the kids are on those samples. I find the same thing when I do it myself, when I use a student exemplar. I thought it was interesting that in elementary that even a student who's not a very competent writer is picking out things with probably a more competent student's work and I find that with my own students too. That they're really quite good at picking out other peoples' errors and so forth, so I think that's interesting.

Although Akumal is on board with working with the rest of the group in the PLC, there are times when she has questioned the amount of time being put into the meetings and the focus on student writing. The following piece of Akumal's narrative highlights her desire to spend more time with her own department and less time in the larger inter-disciplinary PLC.

Right now, for me, as a department head, I think we need to refocus because I think that we've gotten a lot of new materials, especially at the senior level and we need to make sure that we're creating good assignments. It doesn't matter how good your assessment tools are, you need to make sure that the things you are assessing are also quality things and right now we need to rebalance that. We need to spend some time developing some curricular assignments around all the new materials. That doesn't mean we won't keep writing and we won't keep assessing and all of those things but in terms of, when we have PD time, I really feel like I need some time with my department to make sure that we're not falling behind in that area too.

This aspect of Akumal's narrative did not change from the first interview to the last. It's difficult to say whether that has to do with where she is in her career, her connection to the PLC, or

something else entirely. It is important that as a member of the PLC, her concerns are heard and discussed within the group.

I think that maybe a lot of departments are feeling that way right now that maybe we need to go back and make sure that we're not losing some of the momentum in our departments. Let's assess and let's look at this rubric but we are ignoring what we need to be doing in our departments. There needs to be a balance. I think a re-balancing of the PD time that we're spending on this now so that there's time for some department work as well.

She can also see that there are some members of the group who have not fully bought into what the group is trying to achieve or else they just do not feel the need or the comfort level to be an active participant in the PLC meetings.

The reasons are probably as myriad as the staff; different philosophical takes on things, maybe it's sort of a natural thing for some teachers to feel like they just want to do their own thing. Maybe they feel it's scrutiny or maybe they are just very independent and they're not used to working collaboratively. I think it comes down to your character and how you work. I think those would probably be the two reasons; you just don't really like collaborating or you are perhaps threatened by it in some ways. That's human nature. That will always be the case but I think rather than focusing on that, you focus on the fact that there is such wide participation.

Even though Akumal is in her 31st year of teaching, she still feels that her participation in the PLC has led to some changes being made in how she teaches. In the first interview, Akumal stated that the changes made to her teaching revolved around the use of the common assessment tool developed by the PLC.

I think since being involved in the PLC, really making sure that kids have a clear idea of what's expected and making that rubric (is what has changed).

Her narrative changed dramatically after the second interview. Akumal realized that her participation in the PLC had a strong effect on her as a teacher and her responsibility to her students.

I think one of the biggest things is that it has really made me look at my assignments and this whole thing about assessment has really made me think that is really only one part of this. We're not necessarily assessing good things to begin with. So it's really made me look at the things that I'm assessing, not just the ways. That's kind of where it started, the ways I'm assessing and really making a conscious effort to think about how I'm assessing but also looking at the items that I'm assessing. I really feel I'm more conscious now of if this is something that is really important; is it a learning objective that's appropriate for grade 10, 11 and 12?

Even though she is in her last years of teaching, Akumal strong feelings of responsibility towards her students coupled with the dialogues that had occurred in the PLC have caused her to question what she is doing in the classroom and it is truly beneficial for her students. This may not have occurred for her had she not been an active participant in the PLC.

I think it's just becoming more conscious. If you're thinking about how you're going to assess things and if you're becoming more conscious, naturally it's going to sort of be bookmarked by what went before that, right? Even the whole idea of no zeroes and all of those things that we have really been grappling with, I think that's a natural progression to back up and say why? Why am I giving this assignment? I think it's just becoming more conscious about your methodology.

In addition, Akumal feels that her participation in the PLC has also changed the way in which she interacts professionally with her colleagues. That professional dialogue has also caused her to reflect on her teaching and her role in the PLC. Although she was very clear in both interviews that she felt the need to spend more time with her own department, Akumal's second interview shows that she recognizes the value of the large PLC group meeting together.

It's been a really good professional development for me because outside of my own department, I really haven't interacted with a lot of people in the other humanities departments. I see that there's so much learning that is taking place. I'm learning how it is different in Christian Ethics, how Core is different and I especially appreciate the link that's been made with Core because I think we've operated in isolation for so long. I think it's to the detriment of our students that we've done that so I think that part's been really good. A lot of people from the group have come to me and said wow, that's been really helpful. People in Christian Ethics and Social Studies say it's been really helpful to see what you're doing and I think English and Core have kind of been at the front of this because we do a lot of writing and a lot of assessing. I think we've been helpful to some of the other humanities departments where the writing isn't emphasized so much.

This piece of Akumal's narrative from her second interview reveals that she has been able to transfer the learning that she achieved in the larger PLC to her own department. She also vocalizes the realization that the work done in the larger inter-disciplinary PLC facilitated the same sort of dialogues and learning in her own departmental group.

In my own department, for example, we took our English PD on Friday and so we thought it would be really interesting to do some calibrating with assignments, but it was nice because we were using our own assignments. We were using things that we had

recently developed and we were looking at everything from grade 10 to grade 12. What was really interesting is that there were only four of us and we were using point 25 out of 10 and we were within a point 5, the four of us, on every piece of writing right from grade 10 to grade 12 that we calibrated. So I think it's really helped us to tighten up our consistency because we were using a common rubric. I think that because we've done it in the big group, I think that the discussions we've had about the calibration of assignments is just really helping us to tighten up what we're doing.

When looking into the future and the sustainability of the PLC, Akumal is optimistic that the work of improving student learning will continue, as long as the teachers, themselves, are the driving force behind the work.

The reason that I think it's been successful, and I think it's been successful, is because it came out of a natural or agreed upon need in the school. I watch the difference when things are imposed perhaps from downtown or whatever, and you have this automatic resistance. I don't think we've had that resistance because I think everyone believes that it's going to be valuable to them, that there's something that they get out of it. I think at the heart of everything, we're all a little selfish, so there has to be something that makes you say, there's something in this for me. I think that pretty well everyone in the group would say, I'm pretty confident that they would say I've gotten something out of this.

Akumal also stated that there are so many staff members invested in the PLC's goal to improve student writing, that even if there is some staff turnover in the coming years, there will still be enough original members of the PLC to sustain the group and to induct any newcomers into the PLC.

Like John, Akumal also experienced a wide range of emotions throughout her experience of being an active participant in the PLC. These emotions included happiness, frustration, anxiety, enthusiasm and curiosity.

Happiness - Well, I think that this is going to translate into really good things for kids.

People are, certainly are more conscious of getting kids to . . . of getting kids to write and I think the accountability of maybe handing things in, you know, being expected to do things forces us all to be more accountable so I'm glad about that.

Frustration - Just finding time to meet and to get together, you know? There are huge periods of time sometimes between when we meet. I guess trying to balance. Now I feel that we need to meet as an English department. I feel like we've sort of sacrificed that time and working together and getting some new materials together for a lot of the new books that we're doing and stuff. So that and there's no easy answers to that.

(Also) I know that no matter what the expectations are there are still going to be people who are going to resist doing it, but that's life.

Anxiety – Well just being able to make sure that I fulfill what I'm supposed to be doing, making sure that I get enough samples and that I'm doing that. I mean I feel huge responsibility to my grade 12 classes and so I'm just trying to fit those things in because they aren't necessarily things that I would be (doing), essay writing, yes, but writing paragraphs or things like that I have to make a special effort to do that whereas if I'm teaching Grade 10, it's just natural that I would be doing that.

Enthusiasm- I think it's because it's contagious. I see other people coming back to the meeting and talking about (using the rubric) and I hear kids talking about the fact that,

oh yeah we used that rubric in so and so's class and I think we're making progress. I think that kids are going to benefit because I really do think we're making progress.

Curiosity - I'm curious about what the data's going to show in terms of the writing. I'm curious as to whether people will continue with using the rubric. If they'll feel that there's benefit enough and I hope I'm around long enough to see some answers to those things, to see where my curiosity leads.

Even in her 31st year of teaching, being an active participant in a PLC has engaged Akumal to the point where she is interested in seeing if the goal to improve student writing will be realized through the work of the teachers in the PLC. At a time when many teachers may be looking forward to retirement, Akumal is experiencing the effects, both positive and negative, of her membership in a PLC. She continues to be enthusiastic about the PLC even though it has required her to make some changes in how she executes her job as a teaching professional.

Autobiographical Narrative

As a member of the PLC being studied, I too had a story to tell about my experiences with the PLC. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) articulated that one of the possible points for the narrative inquirer to start is with the narrator, or researcher, themselves. As researcher and narrator, I felt that it was important to tell my own story along-side the stories of two of my colleagues to gain a broader perspective of the PLC being studied. My own experiences were no less valuable to the narrative inquiry methodology of this research study than any of the other participants'. To that end, I interviewed myself using the same questions as with the other two participants so that I would not simply be relying on memory as I wrote this section. My own interview was a part of the field texts collected for this research study. According to Molloy

(1991), “life is always, necessarily, a tale” (p.5) and this was the tale of my life experiences as an active participant of an interdisciplinary PLC at the high school level.

I am just finishing up my fifteenth year of teaching; ten of those years were spent in an alternative educational program, as stated in Chapter 1, one year was spent as a substitute teacher, and the remaining four have been at Sacred Heart School where I am currently a member of the PLC being examined in this research study. During that time I have taught Grade 6 as well as high school English, Social Studies, Christian Ethics, Math, Interior Design, and a variety of Home Economics classes. In addition, I have had some administrative experience in two different buildings and am currently awaiting placement as a vice principal in a high school.

Sense of Identity

I came from a family of teachers, including both parents, four uncles, one aunt and a brother, and, as a result, I did not want to enter the field of education myself. In fact, I had decided on two different career paths before I inevitably entered the College of Education.

There had to be something else that I could do, but all along I just felt drawn to it.

I decided to take a year off to do some travelling and to try and figure out what it was that I wanted to do and it was during that time, travelling with a friend through Europe that I really decided that, no, there's no use trying to deny this, I really need to be a teacher. I think the two places that really made me decide this was, first of all, visiting Dachau concentration camp and the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam and just knowing that I have such a passion for learning and wanting to share that passion with other people. I've been very happy. I can't imagine what else I would do in life that would make me this happy. I enjoy my job.

Part of the joy I have with my job is in the fact that I will always be learning new things or new ways of doing things.

I still have a love of learning. I enjoy sharing that love of learning and my knowledge with others and helping young people improve their learning and it's just a great feeling when you see that light bulb go on over top of their heads when they really understand something.

Throughout the fifteen years of my teaching career, there have definitely been some defining moments that have affirmed for me that I have made the right decision. Looking back, it was working with students in the alternative education program, the most difficult years of my teaching career, where most of the defining moments occurred. The reason for this is because I truly felt that I was making a difference in the lives of those students.

I've had the opportunity to work with students who did not have an easy life. Some of them were responsible for looking after and feeding their younger siblings because their parents were out partying and may not be home for days. Some of my students have been living on the streets and some have even been prostituting themselves just to survive. These were kids who were as young as 11 years old. Education was definitely not their main priority. These kids needed more than someone to teach them math and grammar, they needed a teacher who was also a social worker, a cook, a mom and a compassionate and understanding listener.

Alternate education was not an area in which I ever thought I would work, it was not even on my radar as an option. However, the students I had the opportunity to work with taught me more about teaching and life than I would have ever learned in a regular setting.

Those students, for the most part, had lots of issues outside of their educational issues, their learning issues that they dealt with on a daily basis. When they would come back to visit, after they had moved on to high school or even finished high school when they came by to visit, to share that they were doing something, they had a job, they're holding down a job, they've finished this program, they've gotten this training, they really were proud to come back and share what it was that they had accomplished. Those were moments that really made me feel that I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. When I'm helping a student and, like I said earlier, I can see that light bulb go on in their eyes like "yeah, I understand this; it's making sense for me", those are those moments that really make me feel like I'm doing the right thing; that this was my calling and I'm glad that I ended up following my heart.

These experiences helped to form my identity as a teacher and it should come as no surprise that I see my role as encompassing much more than simply imparting knowledge to my students and assessing their ability to learn that information.

It's very important to me to build relationships with my students. It's not important that I'm liked, but it's important that I have a relationship with my students so they feel that they can trust me, that they feel safe. I try to create a climate in my classroom where students feel safe, like they belong. I know, just from past experience, that something a teacher says to you can really stick with you for the rest of your life, especially if it's a negative comment so I would describe myself as a teacher who is really positive, who really wants what's best for students. I don't think that means that I'm a softie, though. I have high expectations and I try to help the students to achieve those expectations that I have of them. I'm a teacher who really loves to learn new things. I like to try new things.

I'm not afraid to take risks. I think my time at the alternative middle school broke down some of those barriers for me where I'm not afraid of trying something and it not working and ultimately, if it's going to help students, that's the kind of teacher that I want to be.

Like both John and Akumal, Helping students to be the best that they can be in an extremely important part of my job. Like the other two participants, I, too, feel that being a positive influence in their lives is more important than teaching the curriculum.

I think what I enjoy most about teaching is forming relationships with students and being able to be a positive influence in their lives; hopefully I'm a positive influence in their lives. Not everyone will see eye to eye with me, but just forming those relationships with kids, making a difference for them, helping their learning to improve, helping them to feel good about themselves and seeing them really shine, that's what I enjoy the most. And why do I enjoy these things the most? I think it's because it makes me feel good about myself, that I've done something to help someone else out and that I'm doing my job well.

For me, then, I feel that many of my strengths as a teacher revolve around creating and maintaining positive relationships with my students. I don't think that I would have the same effect as a teacher if I was not good at relationship building.

I think my biggest strength is in the relationships that I build with students. I think making them feel safe and valued and letting them know my expectations and being very clear about that helps them in the long run. There are no surprises and they know what's expected of them and they know how to achieve that and they know that I'm there to help them to achieve that. How do I know? I guess I know because kids come back and talk to me and ask me if I can teach their other classes or they'll come back and visit and say

things like, “I remember grade 9. We used to do this and it was fun and I learned a lot in your class.”

I also have areas which I feel need improvement. Like many other teachers, I love to learn and one of the things I like to learn about is how to become a better teacher. I don't think that anyone can truly say that they don't have any room for improvement.

I wish I was more creative. I think I'm more right-brained, left-brained, I'm not sure which one it is where you're very goal oriented and you have things done in a set way and it's about knowledge and not so much the creative side. I don't have that in my repertoire and I wish I did. I try to find ways to be creative so that's one area that I need improvement on for sure. How I know that is that I look at some teachers and some of the things that they do that are really creative and I'm really impressed and wish that I could do those kinds of things. I always want to improve my content knowledge. I'd like to find ways to incorporate more First Nation and Métis ways of knowing into my content areas. I'm a Home Economics teacher and it's easier for me to do in some of the other classes I teach, but I struggle a little bit with that and so I think I need to improve on that.

I know that there are many areas of my teaching which could use improvement and the good news is that I will have the next fifteen or so years to continue to learn about improving my craft so that I can better serve the students in my care. Any improving that I do will ultimately benefit my future students and myself as an individual.

Experience with the PLC

Although I am not a senior English teacher and was, consequently, not one of the initial teachers to identify writing as an area of extreme need in the upper grades, I was very enthusiastic about the creation of the humanities PLC at Sacred Heart High School. Even at the

Grade 9 level, I could see the necessity of working toward improving student learning in the area of writing and I was excited to be a part of a group that would be collaborating together to achieve that goal.

We started talking about student writing and what we could do to improve it and out of that the humanities PLC developed a common assessment tool, a writing rubric, that would be used across all humanities classes, across grades 9-12. And that the students would get familiar with it, the idea was that they would get familiar with the criteria for assessment, that there were 6 main areas that would be consistent on every assignment, whether you were in English or Christian Ethics or Law or Psychology or History, the 6 components would stay the same to really focus on the writing and you could always add in more content specific parts for your rubric but those 6 elements would always be there. And it's just grown from there.

I have been a vocal supporter of the PLC from the outset because I can see the value of it and the benefit to both teachers and students. I have always enjoyed collaborating with colleagues, but I wonder if I would have been so supportive of it had I not been working on my master's degree and reading literature related to PLCs and their benefits.

It can inform our teaching. Some areas that maybe are lacking for individual students or classes as a whole, we can see that if one of those 6 elements are low than we can focus our lessons around that to maybe try and improve student writing and hopefully as the students get used to seeing this rubric in all of their humanities classes they'll know that the expectations are consistent and they will need to work on their writing skills.

As I stated previously in Chapter 1, having worked in close collaboration at the alternative middle school for the first nine and a half years of my teaching career, I really felt

something was missing when I transferred to Sacred Heart, but I couldn't identify exactly what that was. With the creation of the PLC, I was able to recognize that what I had been missing was the collaboration and feeling of collegiality that came with being an active participant in a PLC.

I think, to me, the most important is the collaboration, the fact that we're working together. Coming from, again, my background at the alternative middle school, people worked together all the time, we had to, because most of the students had a lot of behavioral issues. We constantly collaborated on strategies for how to deal with particular kids and their behaviors. Also every classroom had at least two teachers that team taught plus an educational assistant and we were always collaborating and working together, so to come from that to a mainstream high school where teachers mostly work in isolation, maybe a little bit of sharing of materials in your departments, but to lose that collaboration was hard. So that's what's most important to me, personally, people sharing their ideas in a safe environment and the fact that teachers are talking to each other about assessment which is great because that can only benefit students.

As a result, I have been a vocal supporter of the PLC and the work done in it.

I have had some very positive experiences as an active participant in the PLC. One aspect that has been extremely interesting is the learning that I have achieved in the process. I don't believe that this would have occurred if I had remained in the traditional high school model of working in isolation.

The idea is that teachers use the rubric at least three times in a semester, collect that data so it can be inputted into a program, computer spreadsheet that would use the data then to form a chart so we could have some concrete evidence as to whether or not the work our PLC is doing with collaboration on this assessment is actually producing some

results. Also, we have met a couple of times as a PLC to calibrate assignments together. Even though we have a common assessment tool, it's really interesting to see that teachers are still kind of all over the place with marking and so we've calibrated some assignments together and then discussed why we maybe thought this particular student deserved a particular mark. I think the best thing that's come out of this is the dialogue that's been happening. We don't always agree, but the dialogue between teachers about their craft has been a really good part of this.

As a result of the dialogue that has occurred within the PLC, I have made some changes in the way I teach and some of the strategies that I use. It has been extremely valuable to me as a professional to hear other colleagues talk about what they are doing in their classrooms. Due to the fact that we teach on such isolated "islands", for the most part, we rarely have the opportunity to see into each other's classrooms to observe how other people teach.

It's definitely made me think about the assignments I am giving, what other people are saying they're doing in their classrooms; it's changed how I use the rubric in the class, and how the assessment is done. The students have the chance to self-assess and peer assess, they have the rubric ahead of time . . . that's not new. I had been doing that before, but them having the same rubric for all of their assignments has been really helpful. It's made marking a lot easier for me. Using the words in the rubric, the language, I've been doing that a lot more consistently so the students are aware exactly of what they need to do, there are no surprises for them, which I think is great.

Although I was aware, due to my exposure to literature on the topic, that I would experience some change as a result of my participation in the PLC, I was unsure as to what that change

would manifest as in my daily teaching life. As a supporter of the PLC, I was open to whatever form that change would take.

I think that change has occurred partly because I needed to do something different with my assessment. Like I said, I had been using rubrics before and giving them to the students ahead of time so that there weren't any surprises but the big change has been because of the PLC. The change in some of the teaching strategies that I use and some of the assignments that I give has been a direct result of some of the conversations that have gone on in the PLC. I've had a chance to collaborate a little more with people instead of just working in my own little classroom, my own little island and keeping pretty much to myself what I was doing there.

My participation in the PLC has changed the way in which I interact professionally with my colleagues. In the past we had shared materials, but we hadn't really talked to each other about how we teach or how we assess students. Due to our individual business and prep times that were not at common times, our professional sharing had amounted to passing on units in binders to photocopy for our own purposes.

It's opened up the door for a lot more conversations, professional conversations. We're busy as teachers and don't have a lot of time to collaborate, although some professional conversations did occur previously, mostly in department meetings, which I guess you could say is a small PLC as well. More conversations are taking place in the lunchroom, in the hallways; more teachers are going into other teachers' classrooms to talk about what they're doing and looking over assignments and saying, you know, what do you think I could do differently? How do you think I could improve? I think the participants in the PLC, myself included, feel more comfortable talking to other teachers about what

they're doing and not feeling, you know, threatened maybe or anxious about maybe allowing someone to see that they don't have all of the answers. So my interaction has changed a lot in that way where I'm having more discussions with my colleagues both those in my department and those who aren't in my department just about student learning and about assessment which wasn't happening before so that's been great.

There was also a gradual movement away from working in isolation to working in collaboration with colleagues. This was a change in school culture as it had not been happening to such a great extent before the advent of the inter-disciplinary PLC at Sacred Heart High School.

There seems to have been a really big change in how we work together as a staff, how we collaborate and what's really great to see, in my opinion, are those teachers who really did things on their own start to open up and collaborate with others. Some people, this isn't such a stretch for, they like collaboration, but the ones who really seemed, at the beginning of this process, to be their own island and not really care to share with others, to see those people embrace the PLC and open up and the barriers broken down, people talking about student learning, that's really been the most important thing for me, I think, because I've seen so much growth in myself and in other teachers and it's, in my opinion, a direct result of working in the PLC.

As I stated earlier, I have a bias to my narrative, but then again, so does each of the other participants. The narratives are true from the perspective of the participant. Part of my own bias is that I have strong feelings as to why this process of collaboration was occurring at Sacred Heart.

I think it's occurred because of the participation in the PLC. I can't see any other explanation for it. The conversations weren't occurring, for the most part, between

myself and other colleagues in different departments before this. Like I said, they did occur on a smaller level with the members of my department, but not inter-departmentally and even within my own department, the number of conversations has increased exponentially.

There simply wasn't enough time in the already packed school day to engage in those types of conversations. The PLC has given all of us time to do this.

I don't want to give the impression that my experience as an active member in a PLC was all good all the time. There are certainly some things about it that I would like to change or that frustrate me at times.

I would like to meet a little more. We met quite a lot last year as we were developing our assessment tool and now that we're using it in our classrooms, we aren't meeting as frequently. We only met a couple of times in the first semester and we've only met once really as a big group in the second semester so far so I would like to see the frequency of our meetings increase, maybe not so much in the large group, but even in our departments to be given some time to do some calibration just within our departments. I think that would be really important. I think we need to meet or people are going to lose interest.

My biggest frustration with the PLC is that even though we have joined together to hopefully improve student learning, individual group members' agendas and egos still come into play. The PLC is a group of people and, human nature being what it is, there is the potential for negative interactions among group members and even bullying.

It bothers me, when we do meet as a big group, when there seems to be some divisiveness in the group where there sometimes tends to be two different perspectives or two different

. . . there's lots of different perspectives but . . . two different sides in a meeting. Just to give you an example, if we're calibrating an assignment or someone comes up with an idea, I've noticed that, depending on who brings the idea up, certain people in the group embrace it or kind of seem to attack it and the person as well. And that frustrates me. People are human and they have pre-conceived ideas of the members in the group and they think that they're being very open and willing to hear everybody's ideas. I think there are some members in the group who really don't want to hear everyone's ideas and so, even though we are collaborating, there are some ideas that are more valuable than others and that frustrates me a bit because people aren't going to be on board if they feel that there're not valued. That would be probably the thing that frustrates me the most about the PLC.

I also think that this might be one of the reasons, in addition to many others, why there are still a few participants who are not yet fully on board with the work that has been done in the PLC.

Some people just really like the individuality and the independence of teaching, that we have professional judgment to do things in our own way and they don't really see the need to change. I think other people might feel a little bit threatened. Maybe they're afraid that others will think that they're not quite up to par or that they're exposing their vulnerability and that they're really afraid of what other people will think. And I think maybe there are one or two that just don't like the extra work or don't see the value in what it is the PLC is trying to do so I think there could be lots of reasons. I think there are some members in the group who just want to keep their autonomy and don't really want to change what they're doing, whether they think it's a good idea or not, it's not the way they want to do things and it's hard . . . collaboration isn't something that comes

easy to everyone and so I think in any scenario, in any large group you're going to have some people who don't necessarily agree and that's ok. I think we can learn a lot from those people too that it's good to have people with differing opinions, who maybe question things a little more than others because we can learn from them, we can learn from their ways of doing things as well.

Participating in a PLC at the high school level, especially an interdisciplinary one, can be a big change for people. As a result, the will to change will not happen immediately. Those teachers who appear to not be fully on board may just need more time to make the change.

Despite some of the negative experiences with the PLC, I believe that it will be sustainable in the future, at least for the next few years. In my opinion, most of the teachers involved have invested a great deal of time and energy into working toward improving student writing and I don't think that they will just let it fall by the way side.

I see it continuing to focus on student learning. I think that maybe there are some people who are thinking, you know, well when is this going to be done? But I don't think it's going to be done. I think there are lots of things we can tackle, just because the writing portion is at a place where we are going to keep using this assessment tool we've created and meet back every once in a while, check in . . . how's it going? Maybe be able to see some data. I think there are lots of things we can work on together. There are lots of other issues in the school; one that comes to mind is student attendance. We don't really have a policy and when students are missing, they aren't learning so maybe that's something we can tackle as a group. Reading is another one. Maybe there's a way that we can improve student learning in the area of reading. Maybe the math and science departments decide to get together and tackle some student learning issues that are

common to them. But this PLC in particular, I see it continuing its work. I think people find that what we're doing is valuable, for the most part. I think most of the participants feel that way so I definitely think that it has a future of continuing. As long as there's a need to improve student learning, I think there's a need for PLCs.

I know that I would be very disappointed to see the teachers at Sacred Heart revert to a culture of working in isolation. I would like to think that won't happen and that even if the PLC eventually disbands, that teachers will still crave the professional dialogue and collaboration with colleagues enough to want to sustain some type of PLC.

Like John and Akumal, I, too, experienced a range of emotions throughout my participation with the PLC. As I stated earlier, even though I am the researcher in this study, as a participant in the PLC, the emotions related to my experiences are important to consider.

Happiness- It's great to see people from different departments talking to each other about assessment, asking each other for advice, for strategies, and not feeling that if they're asking that maybe they're incompetent. I think that our PLC meeting together cross-curricularly has really done a lot to break down some of those barriers and make people feel more comfortable. People are having conversations, professional conversations that never occurred before and so that makes me really happy.

Shame or guilt- I guess maybe a little bit of shame or guilt in that I wasn't doing some of those things before. Part of me feels that it was because some of the things I'm doing now in my classroom I wasn't doing before because I really came from a totally different program to a mainstream high school. I didn't know what other people were doing in their classrooms and maybe what I could be doing to help students with higher academic potential than I had been dealing with before and higher academic needs. Using the

rubric to set the criteria ahead of time, making sure the kids had no surprises, they know what's expected, and they do not have to guess what it is that I want.

Frustration- I get a little frustrated when maybe people are made to feel that what they're bring to the PLC is wrong or isn't valued. There've been a couple of good dialogues during the PLC that sometimes people don't agree and we learn from that too but also, because we all work together, feelings can get hurt and people can feel like they're being attacked and I get a little frustrated when that happens. There tends to be kind of a gang up situation at times, but I think we all have something to offer and we need to feel safe if the PLC is going to continue to be successful and just continue to be.

Anxiety- I get a little anxious when I think about the future of our PLC. I really think it's a positive thing. I'm a really big advocate for it and I get a little anxious when I think that it might just fizzle out.

Enthusiasm- I feel enthusiasm when I see kids catching on as a result of our use of this. I use it in my classroom to self-assess and to peer assess and we go through both processes before the students hand in the assignment and, you know, there've been times when the kids have said, "yeah, this has been really good because if I would have handed in my assignment before I had someone else look at it and go through the rubric, I would have done worse. So I got a better mark because we did this in class." So that makes me really enthusiastic and also just to see, again, to see teachers talking to each other about professional things, about student learning, really makes me enthusiastic.

Curiosity- I'm very curious to see where this is going to lead. I'm curious to see if teachers will use the data that we collect to really inform their teaching, to make decisions about their lessons or if they're just doing this, collecting the data because

they've been asked to. So I'm curious to see what will come of the data collection process. I'm also curious to see if this will be sustainable or, if we have a change in administration, if it will go by the wayside, which I think would be really unfortunate.

As I am now at the half-way point in my teaching career, I anticipate that I will continue to experience various emotions as I continue to grow professionally through my participation in various PLCs. I believe that as teachers we need to put the improvement of student learning at the top of our priority list and continue to work together to achieve that goal. PLCs may only be one way to achieve that goal, but, in my opinion, they are a very positive way to both improve student learning and to improve our own learning and practices as teachers. I believe that I will continue to be a vocal supporter of the positive effects of PLCs and an enthusiastic participant in them.

Table 1 depicts the horizontal comparison of the feelings experienced by all three participants as members of the same high school inter-disciplinary PLC.

Table 1

Feelings Experienced by Members in the PLC

	John Smith	Akumal	Myself
Happiness/Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The consistency of the group -The affirmation that I am doing things right 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -This will translate into good things for kids -Teachers are more accountable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Colleagues are having professional conversations about student learning that they weren't having before -Breaking down barriers between colleagues
Shame/Guilt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Not living up to the expectations of the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -That I wasn't doing some of these things

	group or my own expectations		(with assessment) before
Frustration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Comments made to imply that what I'm doing isn't good enough or up to par -The heavy-handedness of some group members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Finding time to meet -Finding a balance between meeting with the PLC and meeting with our own departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When people are made to feel that what they're bring to the PLC is wrong or isn't valued - There tends to be kind of a gang up situation at times, but I think we all have something to offer and we need to feel safe if the PLC is going to continue to be successful
Anxiety	-Not measuring up to expectations of others	- Being able to make sure that I fulfill what I'm supposed to be doing	-That the PLC might fizzle out in the future
Enthusiasm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Having some good activities with good results and being able to share that with the group - Knowing that things are effective or work and giving people a chance to see that maybe there's a different activity they can do or a different way to do it that makes things better or easier. 	- I think that kids are going to benefit because I really do think we're making progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When I see kids catching on as a result of our use of this -To see teachers talking to each other about student learning

Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Learning from people who have been there longer than I have and benefitting from their experiences - I just wonder what other people are doing. What's effective for them; what isn't effective for them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What the data is going to show in terms of the writing -If people will continue to use the rubric 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -To see what will come of the data collection process - To see if this will be sustainable or, if we have a change in administration, if it will go by the wayside
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There are some similarities and differences between the participants in terms of the feelings experienced in the PLC. It is interesting to note that the similarities and differences depicted in the above table are not consistent among the participants. John's remarks appear to have more to do with his own sense of identity than with anything else around him. Akumal and I have comments that identify with teacher identity at times, but also touch on the subjects of student learning and data collection. Perhaps that speaks to the place that each participant is on their professional journey or even to their exposure to the world of educational research. As one of the commonplaces of narrative inquiry is temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006), the differences may be attributed to the simple fact of how each participant was feeling or what they were choosing to focus on during that particular interview.

Summary

This chapter has allowed the voices of the two teacher participants in the study, as well as my own voice, to be heard. The narratives presented tell the story of teachers' experiences as participants in a multi-disciplinary PLC at Sacred Heart High School. Within the stories exist a

setting, characters, a plot line and a theme. At times, conflict is also found. Each narrative, though unique, shares common themes and these are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of PLCs in a high school setting and to explore how teacher identity may have been affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC. With the use of narrative inquiry, three teacher's experiences as members of the same PLC at the high school level were examined. Through the process of the interview, the participants were able to recount experiences, both positive and negative. These individual narratives served to answer my first research question which asked what the experiences of the three individual teachers in the same interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting are. Each participant's voice told the story of his or her perceptions, feelings, and understandings relating to the events that unfolded in the PLC and the work that was done to achieve the common goal of improving student learning outcomes.

Discussion of Significant Common Themes Emerging from the Individual Narratives

In analyzing the stories of the two participants in conjunction with my own, similar themes emerged. Some of the themes that emerged were feelings of affirmation related to the PLC, feelings of frustration related to the PLC, the effect of the PLC on teacher identity, isolation versus collaboration, the learning achieved through participation in the PLC, the effect of the PLC on improving student learning, and the professional dialogue occurring as a result of the PLC. All of these themes are relevant to the concept of teacher identity in that they all may shape the core beliefs that a teacher has about their teaching practices and being a teacher (Walkington, 2005). I also found that some of the themes overlapped with each other. As all three participants are members of the same inter-disciplinary PLC in the same high school, it is

not surprising that the experiences recounted were similar, however, many of the participants' feelings about the PLC, how it has changed how they interact with their colleagues and how it has informed and changed their teaching practices were also very similar.

Satisfaction with the PLC

A common theme that came through in each of the individual narratives was that of a feeling of satisfaction with the PLC. Research shows that participation in a PLC can have a positive effect on teacher well-being (Webb et al., 2009). Some of the feelings articulated in the narratives were comparable to each other while others were unique to the individual participant. The formation of an interdisciplinary PLC at Sacred Heart High School was unprecedented and, as a result, there were no preconceived ideas on the part of the participants of how the PLC should operate. All members were experiencing the journey together for the first time and that may explain why there was some uniformity to the feelings expressed about the PLC.

One of the shared notions that surfaced under this theme was that of experiencing a feeling of collegiality that was not strongly felt before the birth of this PLC. Often, teachers who are learning and working together to accomplish a shared goal in a PLC feel that they have worth and something in common with their colleagues (Lambert, 2003). Akumal stated that she was happy to realize that although there are definite differences between grades and the different humanities classes, there are many more similarities that she did not take the time to recognize before. She was also pleased that the PLC wasn't something that was mandated by the school division or contrived, but that it was developed out of a common agreed upon need within the school and that need was to improve student learning in the area of writing. Rather than focusing on mandated practices, teachers achieve learning when they take the time for true discourse and reflection (Sackney & Walker, 2006).

The idea of the common assessment tool that had been developed by the members in the PLC was also a talking point in the narratives that received accolades. Both Akumal and I were happy that the rubric allowed the students to always be aware of the criteria they would be assessed on. It was important to us that there would be no surprises for the students and that this would help them to be more successful with their writing. I was also very impressed with the fact that more and more people were talking about student learning and assessment and I saw this as having a direct connection with the formation of the PLC, as this had not happened to such a great extent before. All three participants were happy that the work being done in the PLC resulted in more students catching on to what was expected in a quality writing assignment. Student learning can be greatly impacted by a PLC that has a concentrated focus on student learning and achievement (Vescio et al., 2008).

John also shared some of the positive aspects of the PLC throughout his story. In a few different parts of his narrative John spoke about having the chance to voice his opinions and concerns with others and his positive feelings about the PLC being a relaxed atmosphere. It is important that teachers have the opportunity to share their knowledge with their colleagues and take part in discussions regarding what they want to learn (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2003). He also expressed his pleasure with the consistency that has been achieved in expectations for writing assignments across the four grades in all of the humanities areas. This was expressed by the other two participants as well. In addition John alluded to the positive feelings connected with being able to contribute to the group and receiving positive feedback from some of his peers. As Hannikainen and van Oers (1999) stated, teachers participating in PLCs who experience feelings of efficacy and affirmation will be more likely to try and sustain the PLC. In the previous chapter I stated near the end of John's narrative that he is not someone

who always embraces change willingly and admittedly so. For John, participating in the PLC required that he make an adaptive change as he was required to learn new ways of doing things (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). With that said, the most telling statement about the benefit of the PLC in John's narrative, in my opinion as a colleague of his, was when he declared that he was pleasantly surprised at what a positive impact it has had on his individuality in the classroom as well as his ability to teach and evaluate students. Although participation in the PLC elicited descriptions of affirmative feelings and experiences, there were also some negative aspects that were recounted in the narratives.

Frustration with the PLC

Although each participant discussed many positive feelings and experiences that were connected to the common PLC that they are all members of, it was not always positive. Each group member also had some feelings of frustration that they shared through the interview process. Though belonging to a common PLC, each participant is an individual, and so it is not surprising that the amount of negative aspects of the PLC is not the same for each of them. Once again we must be aware that the methodology of narrative inquiry does not seek to uncover absolute truth, but only truth as seen through the eyes of each participant. The narratives presented, as well as the themes that have come through, are from the perspectives of the participants.

In the case of Akumal, the frustrations associated with the PLC were connected with the administration of the PLC, for the most part. She did not share negative feelings or experiences that related to her own sense of who she was as a teacher. In her narrative, Akumal expressed frustration with the amount and frequency of the PLC meetings. She would like to see less time spent with the large PLC and more time spent working on the same things but in individual

departments that are subject specific. That doesn't mean that she wants to stop meeting as a large group, she simply wants to ensure that her own department doesn't fall behind as a result. She felt strongly that a rebalancing of how we were using our professional development time was needed. Such rebalancing is shown to have been an integral component attributing to the success of a PLC in a 2002 study by Scribner et al.

The frustrations I've felt as a member of the PLC are a little different than those expressed by Akumal. In fact I feel that the PLC is losing some of its momentum because we aren't meeting as frequently as we had been. It is important that the school leadership provide time for the participants in a PLC to meet in order for it to be successful (Ingvarson et al., 2005). I am also frustrated that the computer program we had hoped would allow us to see where we needed to improve our teaching hasn't been successfully operational as of yet and that makes me afraid that some teachers may lose interest if they don't see a payoff to the work that has been done. It is imperative that PLCs use data to articulate improved student learning as a result of the work done in the PLC (Vescio et al., 2007). My final frustration is the one that bothers me the most. There have been times in the PLC over the past two years that certain members have been made to feel that what they are doing is wrong and that what they have brought to the group isn't valuable. Disagreement in a large group is both common and normal and when overcome, may lead to some of the most profound learning (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001), but this is more like bullying and personal attacks. In my opinion, this is not the purpose of the PLC and may very well serve to disenfranchise the other members of the group to the point where the PLC disbands altogether.

John's frustration with the PLC is three-fold. Although he has enjoyed the benefits of the PLC to his everyday teaching life, he is very concerned with his autonomy as a teacher and

losing that autonomy is just too much of a compromise for some teachers (Elbousty & Bratt, 2009). One of the things that came through quite strongly in his narrative was the idea that he does not want to be a robot and do the exact same thing that everyone else is doing in their classrooms. Although he now sees the benefit of the common assessment tool, there were times when he felt like he was being mandated to do things a certain way and this was a threat to his feelings of autonomy. The second aspect that caused some negative feelings for John was his perception that the group was meeting too much at times and apparently not accomplishing much. He voiced his opinion that he does not like to meet as a group unless there is something important to meet about. The third negative aspect, unfortunately, was far more personal.

There are negative aspects of participating in a PLC; however several researchers have chosen to focus on the positive aspects instead (Webb et al., 2009). When reflecting on his participation in the PLC over the past two years, John comes through in his narrative as positive, for the most part. There were some experiences that he recounted, however, that were very negative for him. John's story contains instances in which he felt attacked and unfairly scrutinized by other members of the group. He used descriptors like "heavy handedness", "superiority", and having "unrealistic expectations" when talking about those experiences. There were definitely times where he felt that what he was bringing to the group was not valued by some of the other group members but luckily he also felt validation from other group members often enough to counteract those negative experiences. The teachers at Sacred Heart High School did not have much previous experience with PLCs, if any, and that may be one of the reasons why some of them were critical of John's and their other colleagues' work (Wilson & Berne, 1999). Fortunately all three participants recounted far more positive experiences with the PLC than negative ones in their narratives.

Collaboration in the PLC

Teaching, especially in a high school setting with its individual departments, has traditionally been an exercise in isolation and, according to Hargreaves (2006), has typically been resistant to large scale change. Teachers who are participants in a PLC find themselves in a publicly threatening situation where their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher as well as their everyday practices are illuminated for public consumption and evaluation (Servage, 2008). This may be more than some teachers are willing to accept as a worthwhile price to pay for the possibility of improving student learning through collaboration with colleagues.

All three participants told a story about not knowing what was going on in other teachers' classrooms in their narratives. This changed dramatically with the advent of the PLC at Sacred Heart High School. Suddenly teachers from different academic department s were working together and sharing ideas about assignments, teaching strategies and assessment practices and this was expressed in all three of the narratives. This corroborates the research done by Joyce and Showers (1996) on peer coaching as a way in which teachers can learn from each other. Teaching in isolation may have been the traditional norm in high schools, but all three participants embraced the idea of collaborating with their colleagues, even if it took a bit longer for some to come to that level of acceptance than others. Teachers' classroom practices may be sacred (Lortie, 1975), however, as the nemesis of improvement is teacher isolation (Kanold et al., 2008), teachers will need to become more comfortable with collaboration and sharing their classroom practices with their colleagues if they are truly interested in improvement.

John was initially skeptical about collaboration within the PLC, especially if it impeded his autonomy in the classroom. For him, participating in the PLC required that he make Heifetz & Linsky's (2002) adaptive change which required him to learn new ways of doing things. He

was, however, enthusiastic in his narrative when describing the sharing that was now taking place among his colleagues in the PLC. He spoke about the advantage of learning from others what has been effective for them and benefiting from their experience as well as the pleasure that he received when he had the chance to share what he was doing with others, especially when those ideas were valued. This supports what several researchers, including Britt, Irwin, and Ritchie (2001) and Cordingley, Bell, Rundell and Evans (2003) have found in that teachers who participate in PLCs gain confidence and enthusiasm, are more willing to try new things, and believe that they were actually making a difference in student learning. Akumal reported that she felt there was a public will to work together on something important. This aligns with the research that teachers working together in a learning community toward a common goal feel that they have something in common with other teachers and that they, themselves, have value as a teacher (Lambert, 2003). I had been missing the feeling of collaborating with my colleagues ever since I left the alternative program and thoroughly enjoyed working together as part of something bigger once again.

Akumal and I both had the opportunity to meet with a few members of our PLC as well as two university professors and a couple of elementary students where the discussions centered on improving student writing and using our common assessment tool. Akumal was impressed with the collaboration that took place and the sharing of ideas. Even though several researchers have expressed their views that an interdisciplinary PLC will not be effective (Kruse & Louis, 1997; Visscher & Witziers, 2004), our interdisciplinary high school PLC was now expanding and embracing even more ideas. Both of us articulated that we were happy that more barriers were being broken down allowing for even greater collaboration to take place.

Even though all three participants related positive feelings connected to collaboration, there are still some members of the PLC who may be uncomfortable and not fully engaged with the process. The three participants shared similar thoughts when discussing this aspect of the PLC. The possible reasons included feelings of inadequacy, feeling threatened by the process, the wish to do their own thing and even the reluctance to do the extra work involved. Some of these reasons also have to do with the theme of the effect of the PLC on teacher identity, which will be discussed later in this section. Hopefully there are enough of us on board to make up the critical mass necessary to sustain the PLC.

Professional Dialogue in the PLC

PLCs that engage in meaningful professional dialogue will see significant benefits to student learning (Supovitz & Christman, 2003). The amount and frequency of professional dialogue among the teaching staff at Sacred Heart High School that revolved around student learning has substantially increased and all three teacher participants saw this as a direct result of participation in the PLC. Most high school teachers have not had very much, if any, experience with professional dialogue that may be publically critical of their own or their colleagues' teaching practices (Wilson & Berne, 1999). All three participants voiced their perception of a marked change in the quality and frequency of professional dialogues that were occurring between colleagues as a result of the PLC. The participants' narratives all spoke of increased communication not only between the members of their own academic departments, but also with their colleagues in other departments. Learning occurs and belongs to all conversations that the participants are a part of (Smith, 2003). More conversations about teaching strategies, assignment ideas, assessment tools, and improving student learning and these conversations were taking place all over the school. Teachers were talking in the staff room, the hallways and even

popping into each other's classrooms during their prep periods. Teachers need to have these occasions to discuss and share what they know and what they want to learn and to then make connections to their own situations (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2003). John, Akumal and I all expressed our perception that these conversations were the direct result of the work done in the PLC. The PLC gives teachers the opportunity to discuss their ideas in an environment in which they may feel safe and validated and I believe that teachers talking to each other about assessment can only benefit the students.

Learning Achieved in the PLC

A PLC is a way to engage teachers in collegial learning that is very purposeful (Hord, 2008). The three teacher participants all recognized that they have achieved some learning as a direct result of their participation in the PLC. Sackney and Walker (2006) asserted that "teachers' knowledge base is expanded through discourse and reflection and not solely from mandated practices" (p.352). In each of the narratives, the topics of dialogue and reflection were present. In fact, Akumal and I both spoke about being more conscious of the types of assignments we are giving our students as a direct result of our participation in the PLC. This speaks to the findings of Spillane and Louis (2002) which suggest the necessity for teachers to question and examine their current practices and perhaps abandon those which do not support student learning.

An effective PLC requires the teachers participating in it to evaluate the effectiveness of the work being done on improving student learning (Kanold et al., 2008) and the outcomes must be articulated with data (Vescio et al., 2007). The initial plan of the members in this PLC was to use the common assessment tool that they had developed to collect some data from the students' writing assignments that could then be used to inform their teaching practices to then improve

student learning. Unfortunately, the computer program to be used was not yet successfully operational at the time of the interviews, so that aspect cannot be discussed at this time. That is not to say that there hasn't been any learning achieved as a result of the PLC or that the teachers have not used the assessment tool on its own to inform their teaching. The three participants reported that they have learned quite a bit as members of the PLC and that their teaching has changed for the better as a result. This then is an effective PLC as it has worked to promote the learning of the professionals engaged in it (Bolem et al., 2005).

Akumal has been teaching the longest out of all the participants and in her narrative she described much learning that had taken place for her. This contradicts what was found by Hargreaves (1994) that teachers with more years of teaching experience are less likely to take risks such as participating in a collaborative group like a PLC or to accept change or educational reform. One of the experiences that stood out the most for her was the opportunity to meet with the elementary teachers and the university professors. It was especially interesting for her to learn that teachers from all three levels of education were dealing with the same types of things when it came to student writing. She also stated that calibrating assignments together really helped her and the rest of her department to tighten up with consistency.

John spoke of the fact that working together in the PLC has really served to streamline his assignments and the common assessment tool has dramatically cut down on the time he spends marking. He also alluded to the fact that there are no longer any surprises for the students in regards to what his expectations are on his writing assignments. He uses the assessment tool to go through the criteria for each assignment as well as for self-assessment and peer-assessment opportunities for the students.

I have had similar learning experiences as a result of my participation in the PLC. Mitchell & Sackney (2001) suggest that conflicts may arise within PLCs and when these are overcome, profound learning can occur. Though not in agreement always, I feel that I have learned a great deal from other PLC participants because the differing opinions within the group can cause teachers to question their own perceptions and perhaps even change them for the better. Like Akumal, my narrative described the learning achieved through the process of calibrating assignments together and the discussion behind our reasoning. Also like Akumal, I felt like I learned a lot from the elementary teachers and university professors who joined our discussion on assessment.

Student Learning and the PLC

Establishing a PLC in a school is only worthwhile if it is effective and in this case being effective means improving student learning. A PLC that meaningfully impacts student learning is one which focuses on improving the learning and achievement of students (Vescio et al., 2008). This theme was discussed by all of the teacher participants, especially in regard to measuring the success of the work being done in the PLC. All three participants agreed that the PLC at Sacred Heart High School was born out of a need to improve student learning, especially in the area of writing and that this need permeated all four grades in the school.

There are several studies which examine the improvements made to student learning as a result of teacher participation in a PLC (Strahan, 2003; Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins & Towner, 2004; Nelson, 2008). The teachers in this study experienced feelings of satisfaction when they saw that their students were “getting it.” This refers to the use of the common assessment tool by the teachers in their classrooms and the benefits to the students. John spoke about these benefits in his narrative. One of the stories he tells is about an assignment given to

his Grade 11 students. When he gave them their second assignment the students, having already been exposed to the assessment tool at least once, made comments regarding the similar criteria and expectations and that it was good for them. Other than a change in topic, the process stayed the same and the students felt more confident because they were already familiar with the rubric. Like John, I have heard positive comments from my students regarding the helpfulness of the common assessment tool that we collaborated to create in our PLC. I use the tool with my students to self-assess and peer-assess before the students hand in their final copy for assessment by me. I have heard several times that the students felt that they ended up with a much better mark because they had the opportunity to go through that process. Akumal also expressed her feelings that students had a much more clear understanding of the expectation and criteria for assignments and that this was now more consistent throughout all of the humanities classes at each grade level. She also believes that the more you do something the better you get at it, meaning that she believes this will only serve to help students more the more we use the assessment tool. The continuous and rigorous professional development seems to have made an impact on student learning and suggests, as Garet et al note, that longer professional development activities are better than shorter professional development opportunities (Garet et al., 2001).

Teacher Identity and the PLC

Walkington (2005) asserted that teacher identity is “based on the core beliefs one has about teaching and being a teacher” (p.3) and those core beliefs are continually in a fluid state of being formed and reformed with the different experiences one has throughout his or her teaching career. I suggest that one of the experiences that can have a great deal to do with the reforming of teacher identity is participation in a PLC.

Not one of the three participants in this study came right out and stated that their identity as a teacher had been changed as a direct result of their membership in the PLC, however, there were several strands of the individual narratives which fell under the theme of teacher identity. I will start with Akumal. I found it interesting that even though she has been teaching for 31 years and only has one year left until retirement, her participation in the PLC resulted in her reflection on her practice and about what she can change to help her students to be more successful. One of the core activities in which teachers participate is reflection upon one's own practices, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences (Walkington, 2005). Akumal demonstrated this core feature of teacher identity by looking at the kinds of assignments she was giving her students. She came to realize that it did not matter what tool we were using for assessment if we were not assessing good things to begin with. She is now making even a more conscious effort to think about not only how she is assessing, but also what she is assessing. It's difficult to say whether or not she would have had this epiphany without being a member of the PLC.

Like Akumal, I too began reflecting more on the types of assignments that I was giving to my students. As I stated earlier, I began using the rubric with my students to self-assess and peer-assess and I don't think I would have been doing that, or at least not as frequently, if not for my participation in the PLC. In addition, some of the teaching strategies and assignments that I use have changed as a direct result of the conversations I have had with my colleagues in the PLC. This is in keeping with Mitchell & Sackney's (2001) finding that teachers, like students, learn from each other and each other's practices. Some of these conversations may not have happened if the barriers had not been already broken down through collaboration in the PLC. I'm certainly a lot more comfortable talking about student learning with teachers in my own department and others and I don't feel as threatened to ask for advice when things aren't going so well. I truly

believe that I am a better teacher and that the students will benefit as a result of my participation in the PLC and the learning I have achieved as a member.

When individuals work together in a learning community towards a shared purpose, they feel that they have worth and have something in common with other teachers (Lambert, 2003). John talked a lot in his narrative about the feeling of validation that he experienced, that he was doing the right things and that he was “on par” with the other teachers. This was important to him, especially when there were some members of the PLC who, from his perspective, attacked his ideas and did not see him as measuring up to their standards. This validation had a positive effect on how he saw himself as a teacher. For John it was important that he was not abandoning all of the things he did before, because he wanted to retain his autonomy as a professional. He did, however, state that if other people are doing things a little differently or better than he was, then he could learn from their experience and improve what he was doing. Teachers build their understandings not only by the frameworks they find when reflecting upon their own practice, but also from their exposure to the practices of their colleagues (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Also, as I described in a previous section, John felt that his participation in the PLC, especially the creation of the common assessment tool, helped to streamline the assignments he was giving. He has made a few modifications to the assessment tool so that it fits better with his professional judgment and he still retains his individuality, but he firmly believes that it has helped his students and himself. Making oneself vulnerable by taking risks like actively participating in a PLC substantially influences the formation of one’s teacher identity (Reio Jr., 2005). Participating in the interdisciplinary PLC at Sacred Heart High School has had a positive impact on the three participants in the study as well as the students in all four grades at the school.

Findings Organized by Theme

There were a number of findings resulting from this study. In reviewing the findings, I discovered that they corresponded with the themes that emerged from the narratives. In the following section, the findings are discussed in relation to the common themes that became apparent in the individual narratives of the participants.

Satisfaction with the PLC

Research shows that participation in a PLC can have a positive effect on teacher well-being (Webb et al., 2009). This was one of the findings in my research study as well. Before conducting the study, I was aware of my own positive feelings regarding the PLC and my participation in it. However, having the opportunity to interview the other participants in this study demonstrated for me that other teachers have similar positive feelings regarding PLCs. I also found that even though all three participants experienced feelings of satisfaction with the PLC, each had different reasons for those feelings.

Frustration with the PLC

Researchers have stated that there are some negative aspects to participating in PLCs; however, many researchers have chosen to focus on the positive aspects instead (Webb et al., 2009). As a result, I did not locate any research pertaining to the negative aspects of PLCs in my research for my literature review. I did, however, have some findings regarding negative aspects of PLCs in this study. There were varying degrees of frustration that came through each of the individual narratives that ranged from the annoyance of time management to the unprofessional behavior of bullying. One participant, in particular, perceived that he was unfairly attacked and undermined while participating in the PLC.

Collaboration in the PLC

Research stresses the importance of building a culture of collaboration among teaching colleagues in order to improve student learning (Kanold et al., 2008). One of the findings of this study was how valuable the process of collaboration was perceived to be by the participants in the PLC. I learned that all three of the participants in this study felt that they benefitted from the opportunity to learn from their colleagues. All three participants appreciated the opportunity to discover what other teachers were doing in their classrooms and what strategies worked for them. Prior to the study I knew that I enjoyed working in collaboration with my colleagues, but I wasn't sure how the other participants felt about the process.

Professional Dialogue in the PLC

Another of the findings in this study has to do with professional dialogue between teachers as a result of their participation in the PLC. Research shows that PLCs that engage in meaningful professional dialogue will see significant benefits to student learning (Supovitz & Christman, 2003). In this study, the narratives of all three participants confirmed this finding and expanded on it to include the professional dialogue that occurred between participants outside of the PLC structure. Teachers were stopping to talk about student learning, teaching strategies, and assessment strategies in the lunchroom, in the hallways and even in each other's classrooms. I learned that the participants valued these professional conversations just as much as they valued the dialogue that was taking place within the structure of the PLC.

Learning Achieved in the PLC

One of the benefits of participating in a PLC is that it provides teachers with an opportunity to engage in purposeful collegial learning (Hord, 2008). The experience of

participants in this study confirmed this previous research finding. From this study I discovered that all three participants not only learned a great deal from their experiences in the PLC but they also valued this opportunity to learn from each other. In addition, the learning that was achieved by each of the participants directly impacted each of their everyday teaching practices and, ultimately, student learning.

Student Learning and the PLC

If a PLC is going to have an impact on student learning, it needs to intensely focus on improving the learning and achievement of students (Vescio et al., 2008). This study had findings pertaining to the improvement of student learning, but all of those findings were based on anecdotal evidence alone. Unfortunately, at the time that this study was conducted, the program that had been used to collect data around student progress was flawed. As a result, there is no data to date that either confirms or negates the desired effect of improved student learning.

Teacher Identity and the PLC

The primary beliefs that one has about teaching and being a teacher constitute the concept of teacher identity (Walkington, 2005). This study found that the participants' exposure to the PLC had a direct effect on each one's sense of identity. This was not something that was stated outright by any of the participants; however, it clearly came through in their individual narratives. I learned that the opportunities that the teacher-participants had to learn from their colleagues and take part in professional dialogue regarding teaching strategies, assessment strategies, and improving student learning were seen as very valuable to the participants and had a direct effect on what each individual changed about their own teaching practices.

Figure 2 is a depiction of the findings of this study organized by theme. The conceptual framework in chapter 2 depicts the concepts of professional development, PLCs, and teacher identity as well as the factors influencing each, as highlighted in the research literature. The center of figure 2 represents the conceptual framework of the research literature, as described above, and the rest of the figure depicts the effect that the findings of this study may have on the center. Teacher identity and the PLC are both affected by and affect satisfaction with the PLC, frustration with the PLC, collaboration and the PLC, learning achieved in the PLC, and professional dialogue and the PLC, which have great potential to have an effect on student learning. Conversely, student learning has the potential to affect satisfaction with the PLC, frustration with the PLC, collaboration and the PLC, learning achieved in the PLC, and professional dialogue and the PLC, which may affect the PLC itself and teacher identity.

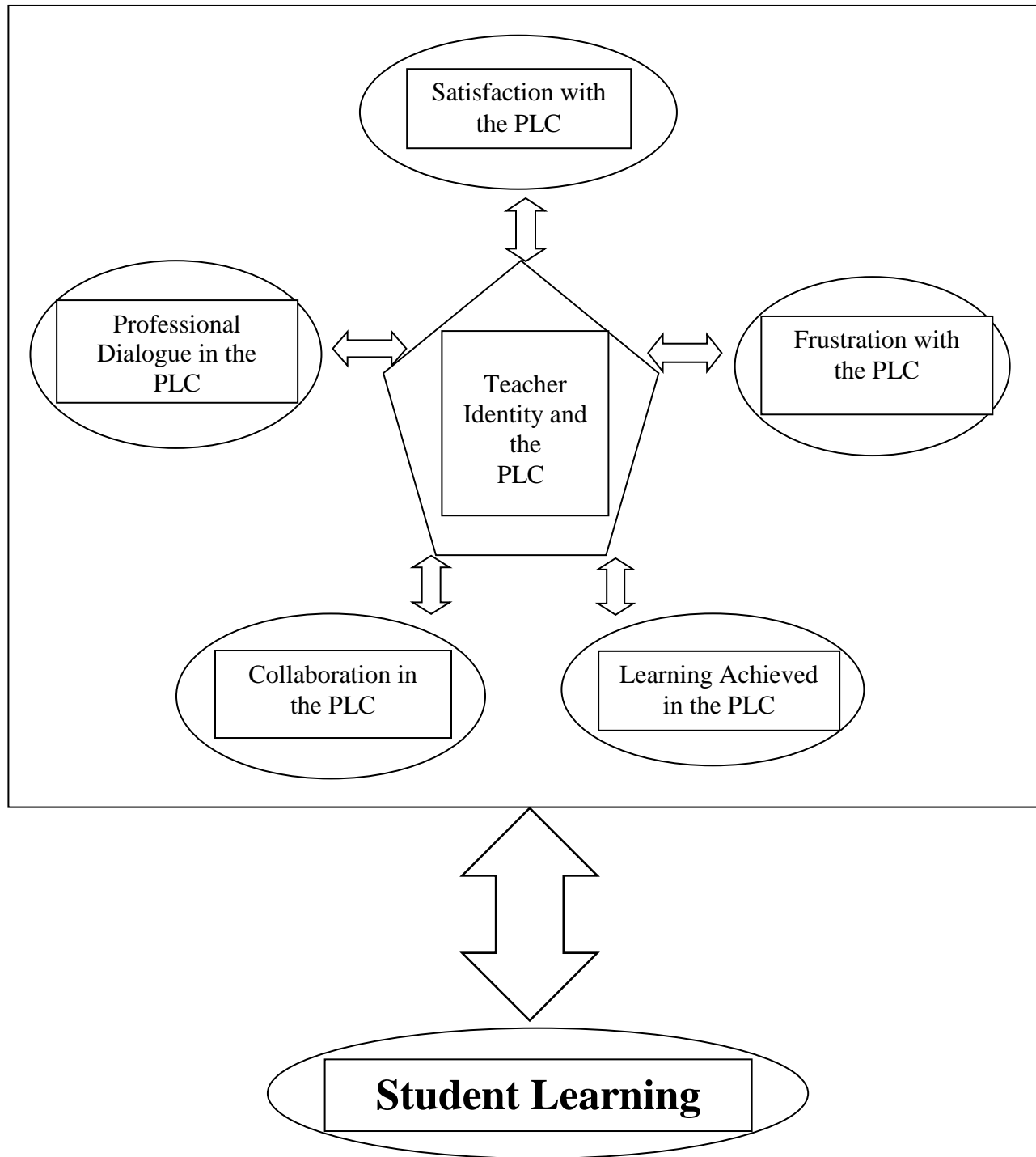


Figure 2. Findings of the study organized by theme.

Research Questions Revisited

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of PLCs in a high school setting and explore how teacher identity may be affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC. The study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of the three individual teachers in the same interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting?
2. How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting influence how they interact with their colleagues on a professional basis?
3. How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting inform their teaching so as to improve student learning?
4. How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting affect, if at all, their core beliefs about teaching and being a teacher?

The answers to each of the four research questions will be presented in this section.

What are the experiences of the three individual teachers in the same interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting?

The first research question was answered in the presentation of the narratives throughout Chapter 4. Each of the participants' stories, including my own, illustrated their experiences with the PLC as well as their feelings connected to those experiences. The narratives presented told the stories, in their own words, of the teachers' experiences as participants in a multi-disciplinary professional learning community at Sacred Heart High School. Within the stories a setting, characters, a plot line, and a theme were present. At times, conflict was also found.

How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting influence how they interact with their colleagues on a professional basis?

The second research question speaks to the dialogues that occurred as a result of the PLC. All three of the participants spoke about the marked change in both the type and frequency of professional dialogues that were taking place both in and out of the PLC environment. Their active participation in the PLC served to break down barriers that had previously existed between colleagues and make the participants more comfortable talking about student learning with each other. Each participant expressed an awareness that these types of conversations were not occurring before the formation of the PLC.

The answer to this research question is reflected in some of the themes that arose from the narratives of the individual participants in the study. The theme of collaboration was depicted in the participants' sharing professional praxis with their colleagues and learning from that exchange of ideas about assignments, teaching strategies and assessment practices. These ideas also surfaced under the theme of satisfaction with the PLC.

Another theme that directly answered this research question was the theme of professional dialogue in the PLC. All three participants spoke about a pronounced change in the quality and frequency of professional dialogues that were occurring as a direct result of the work done in the PLC. There was an increase in the communication that was occurring between themselves and their colleagues from the other academic departments as well as within their own departments.

Finally, the theme of learning achieved in the PLC fits with this research question. The participants in this study expressed that they learned much from their colleagues as a result of

their participation in the PLC. Each participant mentioned that this professional dialogue likely would not have occurred to the extent that it has without the establishment of the PLC at Sacred Heart High School.

How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting inform their teaching so as to improve student learning?

The third research question involves the act of changing one's teaching in order to improve student learning and each participant's narrative told the tale of changes made as a direct result of his or her participation in the PLC. All three participants articulated the process of self-reflection that they engaged in and that this process stemmed from the dialogues that had taken place within and outside of the PLC as well as from their students' results revealed to them through the use of the common assessment tool developed by the members of the PLC.

Several of the common themes that emerged from the individual narratives help to answer this question. Again, the theme of learning achieved in the PLC speaks to this question. The participants articulated how much they had learned from their colleagues regarding teaching practices and assessment practices and how this has helped them to make changes in how they do things in the classroom. They also spoke of how these changes have served to improve student learning, which is another common theme from the narratives that is used to answer this research question.

All three participants felt a great deal of satisfaction with the PLC process (yet another theme that emerged) when they saw that their students were "getting it" as a result of their use of the common assessment tool that had been created by the members of the PLC. The students,

themselves, had even made comments to the three teacher participants about the effectiveness of the common assessment tool and the difference it was making for their learning.

How does being a member of an interdisciplinary PLC in a high school setting affect, if at all, their core beliefs about teaching and being a teacher?

The final research question deals with teacher identity and if, at all, it was influenced by the participants' sharing in the PLC. Although none of the three participants explicitly stated that their identity as a teacher had been changed as a direct result of their membership in the PLC, there were pieces of their narratives that spoke to this having occurred. Akumal is now more conscious of the types of assignments she is giving to her students and how she is assessing those assignments, John, who was initially hesitant to give up any autonomy for fear of becoming a "robot" teacher, was "pleasantly surprised" at how much the creation of the common assessment tool has "streamlined his assignments", and I have been doing a great deal more reflecting upon what I am teaching, how I am teaching it, what assignments I am giving and how those assignments are being assessed. It is difficult to say whether or not these changes would have occurred without the formation of the PLC, but it is evident that they did occur as a result of it.

A few of the shared themes coming out of the narratives are relevant to this final research question. The first two themes may appear to contradict each other, but they are both pertinent to answering this question. The theme of satisfaction with the PLC is one in which the participants spoke about having the opportunity to voice their opinions and share their experiences with the other members of the PLC. Feelings of efficacy and knowing that they were doing the right things in their classrooms were also expressed, which similarly relates to the theme of teacher identity and the PLC.

On the other hand, the theme of frustration with the PLC is also applicable to answering this question. One participant, in particular mentioned that he perceived to be the recipient of some bullying by other members of the PLC and that can have a negative effect on identity formation. This bullying was also noticed by one of the other participants in the study and was talked about in the narrative as one of the things that frustrated her most about the PLC. Fortunately, the same participant who expressed frustration as a result of the bullying also expressed satisfaction at the validation he felt from other members of the PLC when he shared some of his ideas and opinions.

The final theme that relates to this research question is that of teacher identity and the PLC. All three participants revealed that they had experienced some level of change associated with their core beliefs about teaching and being a teacher (Walkington, 2005) as a direct result of their participation in the interdisciplinary PLC. These changes range from what assignments to give students to how to ensure that students are 'getting it' to how to assess those assignments to determine whether or not student learning is improving or not.

Discussion Summary

This study provided a glimpse into the lived life of three teachers, including myself, and their individual and collective experiences as active participants in an inter-disciplinary PLC at the high school level. Through the use of narrative inquiry as my methodology, the voices of all three participants were heard and common themes were analyzed. The four research questions outlined in Chapter 1 were answered in connection with the common themes that emerged in the individual narratives. The narratives served to relate the experiences, emotions and benefits that were directly related to the work done in the PLC in the unique and authentic original voices of

the participants. Much of the information contained in the narratives relates to “the core beliefs that one has about teaching and being a teacher (Walkington, 2005, p.3) and this raises several implications for theory, practice and future research.

Implications

There are several implications arising from this research study. The implications are for theory, practice, and for future research and are presented in the following section.

Implications for Theory

Although there exists an abundance of literature on the concept of PLCs, there appears to be a lack of research literature pertaining to PLCs in the high school setting and how they affect teacher identity, especially interdisciplinary PLCs. There have been some studies done on the effectiveness of PLCs on improving student learning in high schools (Scribner, Hager, & Warne, 2002; McIntosh & White, 2006; Rourke & Mero, 2008; Rourke & Hartzman, 2009), but these studies have either not involved interdisciplinary PLCs or they have not focused on the effect on teacher identity. In light of Walkington’s (2005) assertion that teacher identity is continuously in a state of being formed and reformed as a result of the activities in which teachers participate, it stands to follow that a teacher who is a participant in an interdisciplinary PLC and who is exposed to a multitude of discussions and ideas that may or may not be familiar to him or her, may have his or her identity as a teacher reshaped as a result.

This study has shown that teacher identity is affected by participating in a high school interdisciplinary PLC. Based on the individual narratives of the participants in this study, that effect can be either positive or negative and they shared their experiences with both. Engaging in professional dialogue regarding teaching strategies, improving student learning, and assessment

strategies as well as collaborating with colleagues in a PLC left the participants with feelings of efficacy and collegiality that had not been present before the advent of the interdisciplinary PLC at Sacred Heart High School.

As I was researching PLCs, I came upon an abundance of literature that spoke to the benefits of PLCs to both students and teachers. However, I did not find any literature that directly spoke to the potential for negative affects for the teachers participating in a PLC. Mitchell and Sackney (2001) have written about overcoming conflicts that may arise in the PLC may lead to some of the most profound learning but they don't elaborate about what to do when those conflicts are not able to be resolved. In a study conducted by Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja, Hämäläinen and Poikonen (2009), the researchers admitted that there can also be negative effects to teacher well-being as a result of participation in a PLC, but they did not expand on those effects .

This study has shone some light on the topic of the negative effects of PLCs on teacher identity. One of the participants, in fact, spent a significant portion of his narrative describing the “heavy-handedness” and “unfair scrutiny” that he perceived from some of the members of the PLC regarding his ideas. He also expressed feelings of not being seen as measuring up to the expectations of some of those aforementioned PLC members. Fortunately, this participant experienced more positive feelings of efficacy than negative feelings of incompetency and has continued to be an active participant in the PLC. There is potential to explore this area of PLCs in greater depth in future studies on PLCs.

Implications for Practice

Implications for practice were also revealed in this study. In this case, all three of the teachers, whose voices were heard in the above narratives, spoke about the positive benefits of being an active participant in a high school PLC. Although they also spoke of negative aspects of the PLC, their narratives illustrated that the positives far outweighed the negatives. These positive aspects include experiencing feelings of satisfaction when their students were better able to understand expectations and how to achieve them as a result of the work done in the PLC with the creation of the common assessment tool. They also all spoke about positive feelings associated with collaborating with their colleagues and experiencing a sense of validation from the group. In addition, all three expressed the opinion that they believed the work done in the PLC was having a affirmative effect on students and student learning.

One of the barriers to establishing and sustaining an effective PLC is time and this also came through in the narratives. If PLCs are going to be seen as valuable, then teachers need to be given time to work together. The teachers in this narrative study certainly viewed the PLC as valuable. If the PLC is simply one more thing added to an ever-increasing work load for teachers and they are expected to meet on their own time, then many teachers may not buy into the process and a great deal of potentially great work to improve student learning may fall by the wayside. It is imperative, therefore, that school divisions designate time in the school schedule for PLCs as a form of authentic professional development.

One of the negative aspects of PLCs that came through two of the individual narratives was that of bullying. It may not be present in every PLC, but administrators need to be aware of the potential of bullying to occur in the PLCs in their buildings. Just as with the students we

teach, the administrator must be aware of the dynamics in the group and manage the PLC meetings in such a way as to create and sustain an environment in which every member feels safe and valued. That is not to say that there should not be disagreement within a PLC, however, it is the job of the administrator to ensure that the line between disagreement and disrespectful behavior, including bullying, does not get crossed.

Implications for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of PLCs in a high school setting and explore how teacher identity may be affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a PLC. As I analyzed and themed the data from the interviews and writing prompt, I began to realize that there were more questions arising about the effect of participation in a high school PLC on teacher identity that did not get answered in this study.

Implications for future research include, but are not limited to, the following areas:

1. Research into the differences between participating in an interdisciplinary or subject specific high school PLC in regards to the effect on teacher identity.
2. Research into the potentially negative effects of high school PLCs including bullying, jockeying for position, and relative buy in.
3. Research into how high school administrators deal with the potentially negative effects of PLCs.
4. Research into the effects of a high school interdisciplinary PLC on student learning.

This study utilized a qualitative method to explore the personal experiences of three individual teachers in a high school PLC. There may be some benefit in doing a quantitative study on high school teachers as members of interdisciplinary PLCs or even other qualitative studies with a larger sample size.

Conclusion

The participants in this study shared their experiences as members of an interdisciplinary high school PLC, both good and bad. Through the methodology of narrative inquiry, all three participants, including myself, were able to have their voices heard and their stories told. Although each participant had his or her own unique story to tell, the themes that ran through all three narratives had some commonality to them.

Each participant shared how their participation in the PLC changed several things about their professional life including how they interact with their colleagues, what kinds of teaching and assessment strategies that they use, and embracing the act of collaboration in a traditionally isolated profession. They also each experienced similar emotions along the journey and will likely continue to do as the PLC comes together for another school year. When individuals work together in a learning community towards a shared purpose, they feel that they have worth and have something in common with other teachers (Lambert, 2003). As one of the participants in this narrative study, it was both encouraging and empowering for me to find out that other members of my PLC had been experiencing the same kinds of emotions and thoughts as I had and that I was not alone on this journey. Being part of something bigger is one of the things that attracted me to the PLC in the first place and this study was a validation of that for me. I will continue to be a willing participant in this and other future PLCs that I encounter throughout the

rest of my career as an educator because I firmly believe in the benefits to both the participants and to student learning.

Reflections of the Researcher

The use of narrative inquiry to tell both my own story and the stories of two of my colleagues has been a very rewarding and eye-opening experience for me. Although my bias clearly came through in my own narrative, I became increasingly aware of it when I was relating the other two narratives and struggled to keep it out of their sections. It was a great exercise in both personal and professional reflection for me to analyze my own feelings and experiences with the PLC and I believe that I grew in self-awareness as a result.

One of the realizations that I experienced was related to one of the other participants. John has cast himself in the role, although not intentionally or consciously I believe, of the underdog and in my opinion that is a legitimate depiction. I have found myself, over the course of the last two years, coming to his defense and even casting myself in the role of his protector, unbeknownst to him. As I was writing the last two chapters of this thesis, I became more aware of this phenomenon and tried my best to keep my bias out of his narrative. I did not find that I struggled as much with Akumal's narrative as she does not feel like she has been attacked nor does she need protection. This was very interesting to me as I had previously been aware that I did not like how John had been treated, but I was not aware just how much it bothered me.

There are both positive and negative outcomes with my choice to select participants from the same PLC that I am a member of. One of the positives of my membership in the same PLC as the participants is that I could share my own autobiographical narrative in relation to the other two and then look for common themes that emerged from them. The negative side to that choice is that I was unable to completely remove my bias from the study. Other narrative researchers

can learn from this and perhaps select their participants from a pool of participants that they have no previous connection to, personally or professionally. However, I am unsure whether or not bias can be completely removed from any narrative study as it is impossible not to engage in a relationship with someone who is telling you his or her story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006).

As an English major and English teacher, storytelling seems to come naturally to me but this, although a form of storytelling was much different. The use of narrative inquiry as a methodology allowed me to take on the perspective of the omniscient narrator in that I was able to see into the thoughts and feelings of the other characters, that is, in as much as they would allow me to. This methodology also allowed me to analyze my own thoughts and feelings deeper and more honestly than I had before.

If I had the opportunity to execute this study again, there are some things that I would do the same and some things that I would do differently. Even though I was unable to completely remove my bias from the study, I think that I would again choose to conduct the study with a pool of participants who are members of the same PLC as me. I found a great deal of value in reflecting on my own autobiographical narrative in relation to the narratives of my colleagues. The study might be just as valid and theoretically significant to the analysis of an interdisciplinary high school PLC, but it wouldn't be as personally significant to me as the researcher. The process of reflecting on my own narrative in relation to those of my colleagues was a valuable professional development opportunity for me.

One thing that I would attempt to do differently would be to have a greater number of participants in the study. I tried to select participants who would have different viewpoints and feelings about the PLC, but there is the possibility that they may have all had the same perspective regarding the PLC experience. I think that having five or six participants in addition

to myself would give a broader outlook concerning the experiences and feelings of teachers in an interdisciplinary professional learning community at the high school level. However, I also think that too many participants in a study of this nature would be counterproductive. I believe that the individual characters would not be as memorable and comparisons between them would be more difficult.

As I stated previously, the process of composing my own autobiographical narrative based on my feelings and experiences with the PLC and reflecting on them in relation to the narratives of my colleagues has been a very valuable professional development opportunity for me. This methodology has made me more aware of how I view the PLC experience and what I am doing as a teacher to try to improve student learning both in my own classroom and in the school as a whole. Walkington (2005) asserted that one of the core activities that teachers participate in the formation of their identities is the reflection upon their own practices, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences. I can see the potential for the methodology of narrative inquiry serving as a beneficial professional development opportunity for teachers, especially the autobiographical narrative.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Application for Research Protocol



Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB)

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROTOCOL

- 1. Name of Researcher(s)**
Kari Weiman Graduate Student, College of Educational Administration
- 1b. Anticipated start date of the research study (phase) and the expected completion date of the study (phase).**
Anticipated Start Date: February, 2011
Anticipated Completion Date: June, 2011
- 2. Title of Study**
The Effect of Active Participation in a Professional Learning Community on Teacher Identity
- 3. Abstract (100-250 words)**
The purpose of this study is to examine how teacher identity is affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a professional learning community. With the use of narrative inquiry as the methodology, three teacher's experiences as members of a sustainable professional learning community at the high school level will be compared. In addition, their feelings about the experience and how it has affected each one's sense of identity as a teacher will be explored.

The establishment of professional learning communities, a form of professional development, has been shown to be successful in improving student learning (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997; Hord, 2004; Toole & Louis, 2002). In addition, participating in a professional learning community allows individual teachers to carefully examine and reflect upon their current teaching practices and how those practices either achieving the goal of improved student learning or need to be improved (DuFour, 2004). This examination and reflection may affect an individual's sense of identity as a teacher.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What were the experiences of the three individual teachers in the same interdisciplinary professional learning community in a high school setting? (2) How has being a member of an interdisciplinary professional learning community in a high school setting affected, if at all, the perception of their role as a teacher? (3) How has being a member of an interdisciplinary professional learning community in a high school setting informed their teaching so as to improve student learning?

4. Expertise

This research does not involve special or vulnerable populations, distinct cultural groups, and is not above minimal risk, so expertise is not applicable for this study.

5. Conflict of Interest

There is no potential for conflict of interest in this study as the goal of narrative inquiry is to tell the stories of the “lived experiences” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii) of the participants.

6. Participants

The researcher will select two teachers, in addition to herself, to participate in the interviews (See Appendix A). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), one of the possible starting points for narrative inquiry is the narrator, themselves. The researcher will contact potential participants through an e-mail invitation. Following this stage, contact with participants will be via e-mail, phone and in person. The researcher will explain to the potential participants that she is doing a study and will ask them if they would consider reading the letter of introduction, and attached consent form (Appendix A). Upon reading the letter and the criteria for selection, participants may choose to be involved in the study through signing and submitting the consent form. The criteria for selection are that the participants are teachers and a member of the multiple departments involved in the PLC. Those participants who agree to be interviewed will be asked to give consent using the study form.

7. Recruitment Material

A sample of the recruitment material that will be used in this study is included as Appendix A.

8. Consent

Upon reading the letter and the criteria for selection, potential participants will then choose to be or not to be involved in the research. Those that agree to be interviewed will be asked to give consent using the study consent form (see Appendix A). All participants will have the option of withdrawing at any time, and retracting any data that they have provided for the study.

9. Methods/Procedures

This is a qualitative research study using narrative inquiry as the methodology. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) purported that education and the experiences that are connected to it should be studied narratively. Data will be collected from participants through three semi-structured interviews and one writing exercise. The interview data will be recorded and transcribed. A set of questions has been developed for this study and are included in Appendix C. The writing activity will be a reflection of their thoughts or additional thoughts on their experience of being involved in a high school professional learning

community. The data from both the interview and writing exercise will be analyzed for themes. The prompt for the writing activity is included in Appendix C. Depending on the direction the participant takes the interviews, the questions may be altered to suit their circumstances. The data will be presented with careful consideration of the privacy and anonymity of the participants and of the situations and places that they talk about.

10. Storage of Data

Once the study has been completed, all data (tapes, transcripts, correspondence, electronic files, and researcher notes and drafts) will be securely stored and retained by the researcher, Dr. Michelle Prytula, Department of Educational Administration in the College of Education in accordance with the guidelines defined by the University of Saskatchewan. The data will be placed in a locked cabinet for a minimum of five years and will be stored for five years after completion of the study. After this time, the data will be destroyed.

11. Dissemination of Results

The data and results from this study will be used in presentations at local, national, or international conferences, or may be submitted in an article for publication. In all dissemination of results, fictionalized names, locations, and events will be used to protect the anonymity of participants.

12. Risk, Benefits, and Deception

The potential benefits of this study include an understanding of teacher identity, the development of teacher identity or the effects on teacher identity through being involved in a professional learning community and cohort induction model. Deception will not be used in this study. Participants will not be exposed to harm, discomfort, or perceived harms.

There is the possibility that participants may share information which may put the participant or a third party at risk, if their identity was compromised. For example, a participant may name a school, teacher, or may describe a situation that would threaten anonymity. Because of this, names and locations will be changed to protect the anonymity of the participants, and extra care will be taken when reporting vulnerable segments from interviews. As well, when approving interview transcripts, participants will be able to make changes if they feel that the information contained in the transcript could compromise their or a third party's anonymity, or damage reputation. Participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any time.

To assess the degree of risk involved in this study, I have considered the following questions:

- a) *Are you planning to study a vulnerable population? This would include, for example, people who are in a state of emotional distress, who are physically ill, who have recently experienced a traumatic event, or who have been recruited into the study because they have previously experienced a severe emotional trauma, such as abuse.* Teachers are not a vulnerable population.

- b) *Are you planning to study a captive or dependent population, such as children or prisoners?*

Teachers are neither captive nor dependent.

- c) *Is there an institutional/ power relationship between researcher and participant (e.g., employer/employee, teacher/student, counsellor/client)?*

The relationship is researcher to teacher; a power relationship does not exist.

- d) *Will it be possible to associate specific information in your data file with specific participants?*

Special attention will be taken to ensure that the information in the data file cannot be linked to specific participants. No names will be attached to the transcripts, and once the transcripts are coded, the data will be aggregated with no names or transcript references attached.

- e) *Is there a possibility that third parties may be exposed to loss of confidentiality/ anonymity?*

Exceptional care in the reporting of the results will ensure that third parties will not be exposed.

- f) *Are you using audio or videotaping?*

Interviews will be audio-recorded. Only the researcher and transcriber will hear the interviews. Transcribers will be asked to complete the transcriber confidentiality agreement (see Appendix B). Participants will have the opportunity to read the interview transcripts, and they will be asked to make changes if they believe there is information in the transcripts which compromises their or a third party's anonymity. When the final transcript is agreed on, participants will be asked to sign a transcript release form.

- g) *Will participants be actively deceived or misled?*

Deception will not be used in this study.

- h) *Are the research procedures likely to cause any degree of discomfort, fatigue, or stress?*

The research will be conducted as a conversation between colleagues; no discomfort, fatigue, or stress should occur during the research. The interviews will not be arduous. It is anticipated that each interview will last less than one hour.

- i) *Do you plan to ask participants questions that are personal or sensitive? Are there questions that might be upsetting to the respondent?*

The interviews will be open-ended, and directed by the participants. Upsetting questions are not planned.

- j) *Are the procedures likely to induce embarrassment, humiliation, lowered self-esteem, guilt, conflict, anger, distress, or any other negative emotional state?*

The research is unlikely to induce a negative emotional state in participants.

k) *Is there any social risk (e.g., possible loss of status, privacy or reputation)?*

Careful consideration in reporting results will prevent the possible social risk of loss of privacy. There is the possibility that participants will know one another and may be identifiable based on what they have said. There is also the possibility that participants may share information which may put the participant or a third party at risk, if their identity was compromised. For example, a participant may name a school, teacher, or may describe a situation that would threaten anonymity. Because of this, names and locations will be changed to protect the anonymity of the participants, and extra care will be taken when reporting vulnerable segments from interviews. As well, when approving interview transcripts, participants will be able to make changes if they feel that the information contained in the transcript could compromise their or a third party's anonymity, or damage reputation. Participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any time.

l) *Will the research infringe on the rights of participants by, for example, withholding beneficial treatment in control groups, restricting access to education or treatment?*

There are no control groups in this research. The rights of participants will not be infringed upon.

m) *Will participants receive compensation of any type? Is the degree of compensation sufficient to act as a coercion to participate?*

The participants will receive a small gift certificate of \$50 once the research has been completed. The gift will be a thank-you for their time and contribution, and will not serve as a coercion tool for participation.

n) *Can you think of any other possible harm that participants might experience as a result of participating in this study?*

I cannot think of any other possible harm that participants may experience from this study.

13. Confidentiality

To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants and third parties, pseudonyms will be used for names, locations, programs, and events. Aggregate results will be reported to avoid identification of particular participants through scenarios and stories. Direct quotations will be used in the results (quotations will be carefully chosen so as not to identify the participant), but the quotation will not be attributed to the specific participant. Participants will be informed of the potential risk of participating in the study, and will be asked to sign a transcript release form (see Appendix B).

14. Data/Transcript Release

Participants will be provided with the opportunity to withdraw their responses after their interview and prior to the publication of the findings. Participants will be asked to review the final transcript and sign a transcript release form wherein they acknowledge by that the transcript accurately reflects what they said or intended to say. This form is included in Appendix B.

15. Debriefing and feedback

Following their involvement, participants will be provided with information on how the researcher may be contacted if they have questions or concerns. As well, participants will be sent a brief executive summary of the results when the research is completed, and an electronic copy of the completed research will be provided to the participants upon request.

16. Required Signatures

Kari Weiman
Graduate Student -Researcher

Dr. Patrick Renihan
Acting Department Head

Dr. Michelle Prytula
Thesis Advisor

17. Required Contact Information

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Appendix B:

Recruitment Material and Consent Forms

Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Research Study Interviews - Sample

[Insert Date]

Dear Participant:

My name is Kari Weiman. I am a graduate student with the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. My study is titled *The Effects of Active Participation in a Professional Learning Community on Teacher Identity*.

The purpose of this research is to examine how teacher identity is affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a professional learning community. With the use of narrative inquiry as the methodology, three teacher's experiences as members of a sustainable professional learning community at the high school level will be compared. In addition, their feelings about the experience and how it has affected each one's sense of identity as a teacher will be explored.

Participating in this activity will provide information for literature, theory and practice regarding the successes, challenges and issues of professional learning communities. A deeper understanding of the effects of active participation in professional learning communities on teacher identity will enable educators and policy makers to make more informed decisions about teacher professional development, the supports needed for effective teaching and learning, and a greater understanding of the experiences of teachers as they undergo this process.

As a participant I will be asking you to participate in three semi-structured interviews and one writing exercise. It is anticipated that each interview will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour. I may also contact you by telephone or e-mail in between interviews for clarification or for short questions. These would be minimal interruptions, at your convenience. The written exercise will take less than an hour. The writing activity will be a reflection of your thoughts or additional thoughts on your experience of being involved in a high school professional learning community. The data from both the interview and writing exercise will be analyzed for themes.

In this study, all names and locations will be given pseudonyms. Any names and school names will be removed and replaced with pseudonyms. Direct quotations may be used as supports to the themes, however, teacher name and location pseudonyms will be used in the quotes. The information gathered those who participate in this study may be used for presentations at conferences, professional venues, and academic publications. The taped interviews will be transcribed verbatim. You will have the opportunity to review the transcripts, and add, edit or delete any information you would like. After this process, you will be asked to sign a transcript release form. Data resulting from the interviews will be examined for themes. Direct quotations may be used in presentation of the data, but the case study results will be reported as aggregated (composite) case studies.

Your cooperation in this study would be greatly appreciated. If you are interested in participating, please read and sign the attached consent form. If you have any questions or concerns about this writing activity or the main study, I can be contacted by e-mail at kweiman@scs.sk.ca or by telephone (664-8493). Thank you, in advance, for your consideration in participating.

Respectfully,

Kari Weiman, Graduate Student
University of Saskatchewan

Informed Consent Form for Participation in In-Depth Interviews

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *The Effects of Active Participation in a Professional Learning Community on Teacher Identity*. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask any questions you might have.

Researcher:

Kari Weiman – Graduate Student.

University of Saskatchewan

664-8493

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how teacher identity is affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a professional learning community. With the use of narrative inquiry as the methodology, three teacher's experiences as members of a sustainable professional learning community at the high school level will be compared. In addition, their feelings about the experience and how it has affected each one's sense of identity as a teacher will be explored.

Potential Risks: Careful consideration in reporting results will prevent the possible social risk of loss of privacy. There is the possibility that participants will know one another and may be identifiable based on what they have said. There is also the possibility that participants may share information which may put the participant or a third party at risk, if their identity was compromised. For example, a participant may name a school, teacher, or may describe a situation that would threaten anonymity. Because of this, names and locations will be changed to protect the anonymity of the participants, and extra care will be taken when reporting vulnerable segments from interviews. As well, when approving interview transcripts, participants will be able to make changes if they feel that the information contained in the transcript could compromise their or a third party's anonymity, or damage reputation. Participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any time. Throughout the interviews, participants have the right to answer only the questions that they are comfortable answering, and they may also request to turn off the recorder at any time. Participants will be asked to review the final transcripts, and will be able to add, alter or delete information that relates to them, and sign a transcript release form wherein they acknowledge by that the transcript accurately reflects what they said or intended to say.

Potential Benefits: Participating in this study will provide information for literature, theory and practice regarding the successes, challenges and issues of the effects of active participation in a PLC on teacher identity in high schools. A deeper understanding of the effects of PLCs on teacher identity will enable educators and policy makers to make more informed decisions about the teacher professional development, the supports needed for effective establishment of PLCs, and a greater understanding of the experiences of teachers when they engage in such models. The participants will receive a small gift certificate of \$50 once the research has been completed. The gift will be a thank-you for their time and contribution, and will not serve as a coercion tool for participation.

Storage of Data: Upon completion of the study, all data (digital tapes, electronic, and paper) will be securely stored and retained by Dr. Michelle Prytula in accordance with the guidelines defined by the University of Saskatchewan. The data will be stored for five years after completion of the study. After this time, the data will be destroyed.

Confidentiality: All names and locations will be given pseudonyms in this study. The teacher leaders' names will be removed and replaced with a pseudonym. Participants will be asked to review the final transcripts and will have the opportunity to add, alter or delete information that relates to them, and sign a transcript release form wherein they acknowledge by that the transcript accurately reflects what they said or intended to say. Data resulting from the interviews will be examined for themes. Direct quotations may be used as supports to the themes, however, teacher name and location pseudonyms will be used in the

quotes as well. The transcriber will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement to protect the participants.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until May, 2011. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data. If you withdraw from the study prior to that time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. Throughout the interviews, you have the right to answer only the questions that you are comfortable answering, and you may also request to turn off the recorder at any time.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researchers at the numbers provided above if you have questions at a later time. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on March 10, 2011. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office (966-2084). A brief executive summary of the project will be provided to participants upon request.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided above; I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

(Name of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Participant)

(Signature of Researcher)

Please provide the phone number you wish to be contacted at: _____

Consent Form for Data Transcription Release

Study Title: *The Effect of Active Participation in a Professional Learning Community on Teacher Identity*

I am returning the transcripts of your audio-recorded interviews. Please review and sign the consent for data transcription release.

I _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interviews in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from them as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interviews with Kari Weiman. I hereby authorize the release of the transcript to Kari Weiman to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Appendix C:

Letter Requesting Permission to Access

Letter for Permission to Access

[Insert date]

Dear Superintendent (insert name);

This letter is a request to allow me to conduct my research titled *The Effect of Active Participation in a Professional Learning Community on Teacher Identity* in the Greater Saskatoon Catholic School division. The purpose of this study is to examine how teacher identity is affected throughout the process of collaborating with colleagues in a professional learning community.

I have chosen two teachers, in addition to myself, to participate in the study. My initial contact with the potential participants will be in person. Following this stage, contact with participants will be via e-mail, phone and in person. I will explain to the potential participants that I am doing a study and will ask them if they would consider reading the letter of introduction, and attached consent form. Upon reading the letter and the criteria for selection, participants may choose to be involved in the study through signing and submitting the consent form.

I will take great care to ensure that the privacy and confidentiality of all participants will be preserved using pseudonyms, and will only ask them to participate on a voluntary basis. I will also be as unobtrusive as possible, and will ask each teacher to participate on their own time and at their convenience. All interviews will be semi-structured and recorded. Participants will be made aware of the purpose of the study, and will have the option of withdrawing from the study at any time if they choose.

Each participant will also be provided with a copy of their data and transcripts, as well as a copy of the results of the study. The results will be presented as data in my thesis and may influence policy and practice regarding the implementation of professional learning communities at the high school level.

I ask your cooperation by allowing me access to these individuals by confirming and signing this form, and, if possible, endorsing/supporting my study to the superintendents, coordinators and teachers involved. Thank you for your support!

Kari Weiman
Graduate Student
Department of Educational Administration
University of Saskatchewan

Superintendent (insert name)

Date

Appendix D:

Interview Questions and Writing Prompt

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

First Interview

1. What influenced your decision to become a teacher? Please describe your own journey in choosing to enter the field of education.
2. Describe any defining moments in your teaching career so far that have affirmed for you that you made the right career choice.
3. Explain what you enjoy the most about teaching. Why do you enjoy these things?
4. Explain what aspects of teaching you not enjoy. Why don't you enjoy those things?
5. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
6. Describe your strengths as a professional. What do you know you're good at? How do you know?
7. Describe areas needing growth as a professional. What do you know you're not good at? How do you know?
8. Please share with me how the PLC got started at your school and how it unfolded.
9. Describe where your PLC is now in terms of progress.
10. Describe what aspects of the PLC are the most important to you.
11. Illustrate what aspects of the PLC you would like to change.
12. How do you feel about the PLC? (Describe specific incidents and ask about emotions).
13. What parts of the PLC make you feel happy? Shame? Guilt? Frustration? Anger? Anxiety? Enthusiasm? Curiosity?

Second Interview

1. Describe the progress that the PLC has made since our last interview. Please elaborate on any specific positive situations that stand out in your mind. Please elaborate on any specific negative situations that stand out in your mind.
2. Explain what parts of the PLC you find valuable.
3. Explain what parts of the PLC you would like to change.
4. Do you think this PLC should continue on with the work that it is doing? Why or why not?

5. Explain how much knowledge you had about PLCs before this and how much you have now.
6. Describe some of the learning that you have achieved through your PLC.
7. Considering the learning that you achieved, if not for the PLC, where else could you have learned what you did? Explain how you would have learned it.
8. How has your participation in the PLC changed how you do things in the classroom? Illustrate why you think this change has occurred.
9. Describe how your participation in the PLC has changed your perception of yourself as a teacher.
10. Describe how your participation in a PLC has affected the way in which you communicate and interact with your colleagues.

Third Interview

This will be an opportunity for the participants to add anything to their description of their experiences as members of a professional learning community. This session will occur near the end of the school year, so it will be a chance to look back and reflect upon the work that has occurred within the PLC and a chance to look forward to what they anticipate will occur with the PLC in the coming school year.

Writing Prompt

Please write a reflection regarding your experience as a member of a high school professional learning community. Please include experiences that you felt enlightening, those that you felt were difficult, as well as your thoughts about these experiences. What have you learned? What will you use from this experience in the future? What else would have been beneficial? Please feel free to add any other thoughts that you may have.

